



BOWERY BOY

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No. 83

NEW YORK, MAY 18, 1907.

Price, Five Cents

BOWERY BILLY'S MISSION

OR
SHARPIE MAKES A HOME RUN

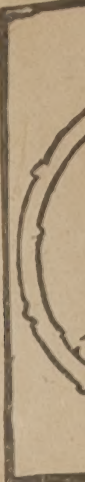
By JOHN R. CONWAY,
PRIVATE DETECTIVE



With a shout of anger, Sharpie flung himself on Jonas, the Fagin, and bore him backwards to the floor. At the same moment Bowery Billy whipped off his disguise.

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE: American lads have always eagerly read stories of life among the street Arabs of our great cities. There appears to be some peculiar charm connected with these scenes among the lowly, even to boys who have never visited New York. To them the Bowery stands for all that is adventurous and mysterious, while its jostling crowds are the various actors in an exciting drama of real life. Believing that an up-to-date weekly would be gladly welcomed, if devoted *exclusively* to stories founded upon the exciting adventures experienced by wide-awake street boys, we have launched the Bowery Boy Library. It speaks for itself.



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Bowery Billy's Mission;

OR,

SHARPIE MAKES A HOME RUN.

By JOHN R. CONWAY, Private Detective.

CHARACTERS IN THIS STORY.

Bowery Billy, an adventurous street Arab, whose training under a certain famous headquarters' detective enables him to solve more intricate problems than usually fall to the lot of boys of his age, and whose bold heart, keen brain and supple muscles carry him into and out of all manner of difficulties in the neighborhood of the once famous Bowery—a lad ready at all times to take chances for a friend, and hating "graft" in every form to such good purpose that he enlists all his comrades in the fight against that evil, too.

Sharpie, Billy's protégé, who is delighted at every opportunity to do "gum-shoe work."

Edith Smalls, the girl of all others whom Billy considers "a peach," who brings the Bowery boy a serious problem to solve.

Bessie Hardress, Edith's friend, who accompanies her to a public meeting of the "N. Gs."

Charlie Acton, the boy from Connecticut, who has the surprise of his life.

Big Jake, the fat policeman, whose attempts to pacify a cat prove most disastrous to himself.

Jonas, "the long-haired geezer," once a famous East Side Fagin, whom Billy suspects of being in the plot to kidnap

Little Tommy Christian, who is left by his devoted uncle in Edith's care.

Madam Perozza, Billy's old enemy, and as sharp as they make them.

Mrs. Manning, an old woman who has long been the Madam's friend.

Phil Erwin, **Thede** and **Jack Marston**, **Thistle Tom**, **Dan Reilly**, and other members of the "N. Gs."

CHAPTER I.

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF TOMMY.

"Green bananers! Wouldn't dat give youse er brain-storm?"

Billy Barlow, otherwise "Bowery Billy," dropped both blacking-brushes and gazed in unqualified amazement at a sight which certainly is seldom to be observed on the Bowery. And he was not alone astonished. The group of loungers that usually congregate near Bayard Street and the famous Bowery likewise opened their eyes in wonder.

For down the wide and noisy thoroughfare, with its four surface-car tracks and the elevated trains thundering overhead, came a highly varnished, closed, private carriage, with a monogram on the doors, silver rosettes on the harness of the span of glossy bay horses, and a coachman with a graven-image face, and pants so tight that they looked as though they had been molded about his limbs.

Bowery Billy had been industriously polishing the

brogans of a locally famous sport, named "Kid" Dugan, and discussing the possibility of that gentleman ever having a chance to "make good" with one of the more popular lightweights of the ring. Suddenly Billy had sighted this festive turnout as it turned in toward the curbing directly opposite his bootblackening stand.

"I say, sport!" remarked Dugan. "Who's yer loidy frien'?"

For at the dropped window of the near carriage door appeared the face of a girl, who beckoned quickly to Billy and then dodged back out of sight.

"Here, Smitch!" commanded Billy, nodding to his chief lieutenant at the stand. "Finish up dese gunboats of de Kid's. Make 'em shine like his repertation."

"Say! I won't do er t'ing but swat youse, if yer say me repertation is a 'shine'!" declared the budding pugilist.

"Aw, fergit it! Wot d'youse care wot dey does ter yer as long as yer wind's good? De las' man dat fought wit'out de use of his mout' was old John L."

With this sarcastic reply, Billy hurried across the walk and poked his head in at the open window of the carriage.

"Green bananers, Miss Edie!" he exclaimed. "Wot's bringin' youse clean down here? Is it er shoe-shine? I know dat we gives de best in de city here, an' no rosum in de blackin' at dat, but we ain't fixed fer loidy customers, an' dat's no dream."

"Oh, Billy!" gasped Edith Smalls, a sob catching in her voice.

"Great bumbleshoots!" ejaculated Billy. "Wot's de reason fer de dampness? Lemme roll up me pants an' wade in ter yer rescue, Miss Edie."

"Oh, Billy!" repeated the girl again. "This is no laughing-matter."

"Nop. I see youse ain't hilarious over it. But, cripes, Miss Edie, if yer wants sympat'y handed out ter youse, put er feller wise so's he kin know wot ter weep erbout."

"It's Tommy!"

"Huh? Not little Tommy Christian?"

"Yes. He's gone!"

"Aw, cripes, Edie! Youse never mean dat? W'y, I didn't know he was even sick."

"Oh, Billy, Billy! he isn't dead——"

"Come! Dat's all right, den. I kin cure anyt'ing but dat. I draws de line at bringin' dead ones ter deir feed ergin. Wot's doin' wit' Tommy?"

"Oh, oh!" sobbed the girl, "I don't know!"

"Well, say! Wouldn't dat putchu erway?" murmured Billy. "Can yer beat 'em—dese goils?"

Then he proceeded to encourage the sobbing girl to explain herself.

"Gimme de straight talk, Miss Edie. Wot's happened ter little Tommy?"

"I took him shopping with me this morning," said

Edith, wiping her eyes and choking back the sobs. "You know, his uncle's away and he came to live at our house till Mr. Christian gets back."

"Aw right. Keep in de middle of de road, dat's er good goil!"

"Yes, yes! I have driven right down here to tell you, Billy," said the excited girl, dabbing her eyes with a pocket-handkerchief of infinitesimal size. "Tommy's gone—and in the strangest way——"

"Dat's it! Now yer gittin' to it, Miss Edie. How did he git erway from youse? Was he in dis carriage?"

"Yes. I told you I was shopping. I sometimes shop alone now, you know, since Madam Perroza left us."

"Há!" exclaimed Billy.

"What is it, Billy?"

"Never mind. Jest spiel ahead, Miss Edie."

"Well! You interrupted me, you know. We drove to Twenty-third Street, and then I told Rupert to take us to Lord & Taylor's."

"Rupert is dis geezer on de seat up here?" queried Billy, nodding at the stiffly stretched coachman.

"Yes."

"Nice name. I knowed er Dutchman once't dat had a dachshunt he called 'Rupert.' Go ahead, Miss Edie."

"Oh, Billy! It's serious, I tell you! I went into Lord & Taylor's, and wasn't gone more than five minutes. When I came out Tommy was gone."

"Where?"

"That's what I have come to you about, Billy!"

"You left him in de omnibus, did youse?"

"Yes."

"An wot does dis Rupert say?"

"Why! He did not see him go."

"Chee! I should t'ink not," grumbled Billy, quite seriously now. "He couldn't toin his head if he heard an engine comin' behind him, could he?"

"He is dull," admitted Edith. "But, Tommy!"

"Aw right. Youse got out an' left him. Yer come back in five minutes. He warn't in de carriage, an' de coachman didn't see him go nowhere. Is dat it?"

"Yes. And then I looked around, and inquired of the man in front of the store who helps people out of their carriages. But he had not seen him."

"And who else?"

"Why, people must have thought me crazy, Billy! I ran up and down the sidewalk and asked everybody if they had seen a little boy in a purple Peter Pan cap and brown leggings, and one man said that if his folks let him out on the street on such a cool day with nothing but those things on, they'd ought to be arrested! He was real mean! I hate a funny man!"

Billy, who had begun to chuckle, broke off suddenly at this statement.

"Chee, Edie! Dis is tough luck. Don't youse suppose de kid jest went inter de store ter find youse?"

"No. I told him to stay where he was, and Tommy always minds."

"Huh! he's too good ter keep, dat kid is," grunted Billy. "I reckon de angels have come fer him, Edie."

"Billy, you're horrid!" she cried. "Suppose something awful has happened to him? How you would feel after saying a thing like that!"

"Well, dere's no use in lookin' fer de woist ter be handed youse all de time. De kid's only strayed."

"Do you think so, Billy?"

"Why, wot else is dere to t'ink?"

"But, Billy! You know how Mr. Christian found him. That horrid man who had him—and Sharpie——"

"Aw, fergit it! fergit it!" interrupted Billy, with a great show of putting no faith in the idea that anything bad had happened to Tommy.

"But where could he have gone, Billy?"

"Aw, a dozen t'ings might have happened ter toll him erway. Youse know how er kid will foller er band, or er monkey, or er street-piano. Say! did youse tell him yer'd take him anywhere after youse had done yer shop-pin'?"

"No. Only we always go somewhere and have ice-cream, or soda, or some candy."

"Dere's half a dozen candy shops erlong dat part of Broadway—say! was it at de Broadway entrance of Lord & Taylor's?"

"Yes."

"Didn't see nobody youse knowed?"

"Why—only for a little while. That was when I was coming out. But I was back to the door in five minutes, and all the rest of the time I should have seen Tommy if he got out of the carriage."

"Den it was more dan five minutes before youse found out dat he was gone?"

"Yes, Billy!" cried Edith, beginning to sob again. "And I feel almost wicked over it. I stood nearly ten minutes talking before I went to the carriage door and called to Tommy to come out and go to Huyler's with me. And then he wasn't there!"

"Green bananers!" muttered Billy. But he looked up cheerfully in an instant. "Den de little skeezicks mebbe got er fifteen minutes' start of youse?"

"Perhaps. If he left the carriage as soon as I went into the store."

"Well—I say!" exclaimed the Bowery boy suddenly. "Who was yer talkin' wit' so long?"

"Nobody but old Mrs. Manning. You remember her? She chanced to be passing, and she is so talkative, you know. Poor old soul! I couldn't get away from her."

"Mrs. Manning, heh?" exclaimed Billy, looking away quickly that Edie might not see his face.

"You remember her, Billy? She used to come to see Madam Perroza."

"Oh, I remember her, all right, all right!" grunted Billy.

"She took a great fancy to me. She's a poor, lame creature."

"Huh!" and Billy's mind seemed to dwell on something beside the object of Edith's charitable remark. "Now see here! Did youse drive right down here jest as soon as you made up yer mind dat runnin' up an' down de street warn't de best way ter find de kid?"

"Yes, Billy. I felt you'd know what to do."

"Dat's right. I do."

"Do advise me, Billy!"

"Sure! But will youse do wot I say?"

"Of course, Billy! You know I will."

"Aw right. Youse leave it ter me. If de kid's lost I'll have a ginerel alarm sent out. If he's strayed away ter go inter a store, de cop on dat beat'll know erbout it. Dere's er bull right at dat Lord & Taylor corner; youse might have axed him."

"Oh, I'll have Rupert drive right back——"

"Fergit it! Don't trouble Rupert ter do nottin' but drive youse home. An' yer stay dere, Miss Edie, till yer hears from me."

"Oh, Billy! Is that what you want me to do?"

"Sure! I wants ter know where ter find youse, don't I?"

"But, Billy, do you think Tommy is only strayed away? I couldn't help being worried when I remembered how he was once in that bad man's hands. If he was kidnaped—my! his uncle would never forgive me. He just dotes on Tommy."

"Now, don't lose yer pretty color over dat, Miss Edie," declared Billy with assurance. "Go home. Keep easy in yer mind. I'll take Sharpie an' we'll find him."

"Oh, Sharpie will be interested, I know!"

"Sure he will. If de kid's strayed away, Sharpie'll find him. If——"

"If what, Billy?"

"If youse don't git home in a hurry, Miss Edie, you an' Rupert, I'll likely find Tommy an' git ter your house wit' him before youse do," declared Billy, laughing heartily.

CHAPTER II.

"BEATING THE BRUSH."

But had Miss Edith Smalls, the pretty little lady in the carriage, seen Bowery Billy's expression of countenance the instant her coachman had whipped up his bays and carried her out of sight, she would have known that the boy was in no laughing mood.

Several months before, after a twenty years' absence from New York and a residence in the Dutch East Indies, where he had made a large fortune, Tom Christian returned to his native city to look for his relatives.

He had been second mate on a sailing vessel, commanded by Captain Ben Smalls, when he left New York. Now he had come back wealthy; but he had hard work to find any relative to whom he could leave his money.

There had been a younger brother, and that brother had married. Of the marriage there was one child, a little Tommy Christian. When Tom, the elder, returned to New York, his brother and his wife were dead—having died in poverty—and their child, little Tommy, had passed into the hands of a wretched "Fagin," one of those criminals who train children to beg and pick pockets.

The elder Tom Christian set the police to hunting for his little nephew; but he was a man used to doing things for himself. He disguised himself as a one-legged sailor, and begged on the street so as to get in with panhandlers and yeggmen, always looking for some news of little Tommy.

He gained his desire, and recovered his nephew, through the agency of Bowery Billy, who had a special connection with the detective bureau at Mulberry Street, and Tommy Christian exchanged his poor estate in a day, to become the object of the lavish care and affection of his uncle.

But Bowery Billy knew that the timely rescue of little Tommy Christian from Jonas, the Fagin, had nipped in the bud a plot to mulct the child's uncle probably of several thousand dollars. This story that Edith Smalls had brought him, and certain circumstances surrounding the disappearance of Tommy Christian, made Billy fear that it was a veritable case of kidnaping.

And these suspicious circumstances included the presence of the old woman, Mrs. Manning, near the scene at the time of Tommy's disappearance. Mrs. Manning had detained Edith at the door of Lord & Taylor's for some minutes, and so postponed the discovery of the little fellow's disappearance from the carriage.

"Green bananers!" muttered Billy, as he watched the carriage bowl away; "dat ain't de foist time dat de old skoit has butted inter me suspicions. Is de madam in dis—if it's a kidnapi'n' at all?"

Billy's muttered observation referred to Madam Perroza, a lady who had once been the Smalls' housekeeper and Edith's chaperon, but who had the misfortune to be the sister of a very expert crook and escaped convict, "Silent Jemmy" Raddigan, and had the greater misfortune to have become mixed up in some of her criminal brother's crooked work.

For this she had been banished from the Smalls' house, and once since, Billy had connected her with a crooked deal—a game to kidnap a certain pretty Italian girl, named Bianca Stradella, who posed at Señor Cannova's studio. The suggestion of kidnaping in this case, and the presence of Mrs. Manning, an old client of Madam Perroza, had aroused Billy's fears at once.

"Dat old skoit," pursued Billy, referring to Mrs. Manning, "has been actin' de spy on Edie fer Madam Perroza, ever since she left de Smalls. Chee! it don't look ter me like she jest happened ter be at Lord & Taylor's w'en Tommy took er sneak. Nix, nit!"

Billy glanced at his watch as he turned away from the curbing. It was then quarter after eleven.

"Say, Billy! why didn't youse interduce me ter your loidy frien'?" Kid Dugan asked. "She looked like de real goods."

"She is," returned Billy, scowling. "She's er peach all right. Dere's nottin' near-silk erbout her, betcher life."

"She looked like she had iron men ter melt," said the interested pugilist. "Mebbe I might ha' sold her a couple of tickets ter nex' week's exhibition of de Try-out Club, over ter Brodie's."

"Aw, fergit it!" ejaculated Billy. "D'youse t'ink she's er goil dat would have a look-in at a bout on de East Side? Say! w'en she goes ter a ball it's at Sherry's, 'r de Waldorf-Astoria."

"Chee! But youse has got high-toned frien's, Billy," grinned the young pugilist. "Jest de same I hear dat some of 'em is goin' ter join dat bum lodge o' your'n—de N. G.'s."

"Youse'll hear more dan is good fer youse if yer don't take sumpin' for it, Kid," declared Billy, in no pleasant mood. "Can it! I got biz ter 'tend ter. Hi, Sharpie!"

As he spoke a wiry, sharp-featured boy, several years Billy's junior, rounded the corner from Bayard Street.

"Wot's doin', Billy?" this little fellow asked, seeing by his friend's face that he was troubled.

"I gotter job fer youse, Sharpie," said the Bowery boy shortly. "Wait till I fix t'ings wit' Smitchy."

He crossed the pavement to his assistant at the stand, who was now busy on another customer's shoes, and whispered:

"Me an' Sharpie's gotter job up-town. Pick up de foist good feller yer see an' set him ter woik ter help yer. We're off!"

"W'en will yer be back, Billy?" demanded the other bootblack.

"Dunno. Mebbe not before youse close de stand."

"I'll see youse at de lodge ter-night, den?"

"Sure!" returned Billy, as he nodded to Sharpie, and they crossed the street on the run to catch an up-town car.

"Dat bum lodge of your'n must be er great t'ing—I don't t'ink!" observed Kid Dugan sneeringly.

"Dat's wot it is!" returned Smitchy Burke, who was an enthusiastic member of the N. G.'s.

"Say, cull!" queried the Kid, "wot is dem letters for, anyway?"

"Ter make fools ask questions," responded Smitchy, grinning.

"Aw, yer no good!" growled the Kid.

"Dat's wot me badge says," said Smitchy, tapping the button he wore on which was emblazoned the two letters in question.

Meanwhile Bowery Billy and his protégé had caught the car and were conversing very earnestly on the rear seat as they rode up-town.

"Say, youse soitenly do put er crimp in er feller," grunted Sharpie, who had been hustled aboard the car without a word of explanation on Billy's part. "Chee! look at me han's. W're are we goin'? I might ha' got er wash-up."

"Dat's all right," replied Billy. "Never mind yer han's. Got any money wit' youse?"

"Huh! wot's dis—er touch?"

"Yer might need some. Here's a dollar."

"Say! expense coin, heh?" exclaimed Sharpie eagerly. "Wot's doin'?"

"I don't know. Mebbe it's er false alarm. But youse listen here—an' keep yer pertater trap shut till I finish."

He proceeded to briefly relate to his protégé what Edith Smalls had told him. Sharpie had at one time been in the power of the very Fagin who had held Tommy Christian captive; he had shown little Tommy considerable kindness, in fact, and Tommy admired and loved Sharpie greatly.

Freed of his master by Fagin's disappearance from the city, Sharpie had been taken up by Billy and his friends, and, as the Bowery boy expressed it, Sharpie was "gittin' licked inter pretty decent shape."

At least, the smaller boy had cut out grafting and was earning an honest living under Billy's tuition. The young detective had found in Sharpie just the sort of an assistant that he sometimes needed, and "gum-shoe woik," as Sharpie called it, was quite to that young man's taste.

As Billy related the mysterious disappearance of his little friend, Sharpie lost all his "professional" interest in the matter; but he was savagely desirous of doing something for the cause of the lost kid.

"Say! d'youse t'ink dey got him?" he demanded. "Mebbe it's dem Black Hand geezers. His uncle's got lots of dough."

"And who'd know dat best?" demanded Billy sharply.

"Why, I dunno!"

"Wake up! yer foot's ersleep!" commanded Billy.

"Wot was yer tellin' me las' week w'en I sent youse ter look up dat French guy wot tried ter swipe Canova's picture?"

"Aw, cheese it, Billy! D'youse t'ink——"

"I dunno wot ter t'ink," declared the other shortly.

"But I ain't losin' no tricks. You says yer seen Jonas, de Fagin, ergin. Look him up!"

"Wot, me?"

"Sure! If he's got Tommy he'll hold him fer coin. An' mebbe he'll do him some harm. Youse know Jonas all right, all right. Dere's anudder chance't dat I'm goin' ter look inter. Mebbe de two suspicions'll jibe in de end. But at foist we separates.

"Youse kin git after Jonas an' loin where he's hangin' out an' wot he's doin'. Lemme hear from youse as soon as yer git him nailed."

"An' wot are yer goin' ter do yerself, Bil'y?" demanded his young protégé.

"I'm goin' ter beat de brush an' see wot kinder boids I kin raise. I changes here, Sharpie. Nix! don'chu cross town before yer gits ter Twenty-t'ird Street. An' don't lose no tricks, kid, fer if yer does youse'll hear from me in er way yer won't like!"

Sharpie made a face at him as Billy dropped off at Fourteenth Street and the up-town car whirled him away. Billy rode across to Broadway, changed again, and in a few minutes dropped off the last car at the corner of Twentieth Street.

There was a possibility, as Bowery Billy well knew, that there had been no kidnaping game at all. The little fellow might have slipped out of the carriage and tried to find Edith, or tried to find the candy store where he knew she would take him.

If so, likely he had either found his way home by now, or been picked up by the police. Tommy Christian was not a very independent little fellow, and although he had had some experience on the streets of New York, he was still timid when out alone.

The treatment accorded him by the Fagin who had bought him of the wretched woman in whose company the child had been left when his mother died, had been such as to smother any natural pluck and independence that the little lad might have had. If Tommy was merely lost in the crowd, Billy could easily imagine that it might be hours before he plucked up courage to throw himself on the mercy of the police.

But Billy began his investigation on the supposition that the boy had been taken from the carriage by some person who meant both the child and his guardians ill.

Billy knew that the policeman who stood at the crossing had plenty to keep him busy; yet he might have noticed Tommy Christian.

Billy was not for having the case reported to the department, however, until he was sure that there really had been a kadnaping and that he would need the police to help him recover Tommy. The newspapers would take it up and make a splurge of it, as they always did of any kidnaping, and that would only make trouble for Miss Edie.

So when the officer jumped to the conclusion that it was a divorce-court case—that some unhappy man and woman were fighting over the possession of their child—Billy let it go at that and made no explanation.

"An', b'gee!" declared the officer, "I could have put me hand on the gazabo that took away the kid. Sure I could!"

"Did you really see it?"

"Ain't I tellin' ye so?"

"Then, yer big stiff!" exclaimed Billy in disgust, "w'y didn't youse stop him?"

"How was I to know? The kid didn't scream, nor nothin'. An' I didn't notice anybody lookin' for him afterward. Lemme tell yer—look out, lady! Wait here till that car passes.

"They're never lookin' where they goes. They only sees th' bargains they're huntin' for. Well, 'twas like this: I seen the man cross th' street yonder to the carriage——"

"Aw, cripes! he got him on the off-side, did he?" exclaimed Billy.

"Sure. He opened the door, looked inside, and I reckon told the kid to get out. The kid seemed to mind all right. They warn't a minnit gittin' across the street again and around the corner. The kid didn't make no holler, nor he didn't hang back none as I noticed."

"What kind of a looking guy was the feller?"

"The one that took him?"

"Yep."

"Why—I didn't notice close. Kinder shabby dressed, seemed to me. There was something about him, too, that was pecooliar—now what was it?" queried the policeman, ruminating.

"Was he a bullet-headed guy wit' his hair cut close—reg'lar Sing Sing clip?"

"Aw, no! Guess we're speakin' of two different chaps," declared the innocent cop. "Now I remember! He had a long hair-cut—looked like an Injun doctor, by thunder!"

"Aw, cripes! I might ha' knowed it! I might ha' knowed it!" muttered Billy.

"Guess you'll have some hard work findin' him, eh, kid?"

"Mebbe."

"Why, it must have been an hour an' a half ago."

"Dat's a cold trail—youse is right," admitted Billy.

"But I'm a warm member, cull. Mebbe I'll pick up er

little information around here. Leastwise, I'll look. Da, da!"

CHAPTER III.

MRS. MANNING.

An hour and a half had elapsed, as the cop said, since Jonas had forced little Tommy Christian out of Edith's carriage. For there was little doubt in Billy's mind that the one-time Essex Street Fagin was the scoundrel who had stolen the child.

"Good reason why de kid didn't make no holler," thought the Bowery boy. "Tommy never had too much pluck. Chee! who would after goin' t'roo wot he went t'roo wit' dat dirty Fagin?"

"Jonas had him frightened out of his wits before. De minute de kid seen him at de carriage door, like enough he was struck as dumb as a clam.

"Tommy warn't a kid like Sharpie. He warn't cut out fer no life like wot Jonas tried ter git him inter. But if Sharpie does his duty he'll git er line on Jonas an' de kid before night.

"Den it's up ter me ter see if dere's really any connection betwix' de ol' Mannin' skoit an' dis kidnapin'. Green bananers! I gotter hunch dat Mudder Mannin' ain't one bit better dan she'd oughter be.

"Yet I don't understand me own mistake erbout it. W'en we was huntin' Silent Jemmy Raddigan after he sneaked from up de river, I looked up dat Mannin' skoit, an' she soitenly panned out 24-carat—an' dat's no dream!

"Ev'rybody dat knowed her gave her a clean bill of healt'—sure! Said she was jest a nice, gran'mudderly old skoit, wot lived on er little pension an' some money dat her son left her in de insurance funds.

"She mebbe was dead stuck on Madam Perroza, an' wouldn't believe no harm of dat old cat; but, chee! here it looks like she was made a stool-pigeon fer dis kidnapin' game.

"Now, if Mudder Mannin' is square, she wouldn't do dat—nix, nit! I must say dat fer once Bowery Billy is up in de air—an' wit'out no parachute! I'm likely ter drop sudden.

"Say! I gotter git nex' ter dis mystery, an' dat's all dere is to it. I gotter dig up Mrs. Mannin's past, an' her present, an' wot de forchune-teller is handin' out ter her as de proper dope fer de future. If she's been tolled

inter doin' one queer stunt, mebbe she's done odders," pursued Bowery Billy, with his suspicions fairly aroused.

"An old skoit like her ain't goin' ter live till she's so old that one foot's in de grav-y, an' de odder's all but there, before she toins crooked—not much!

"If she stood dere an' held Edie w'ile Jonas was makin' er getaway, den it ain't de foist queer trick she's done. Her record must be somewheres, an' Bowery Billy's de geezer ter scare it up."

So Billy did not spend much time in trying to pick up a trace of the missing Tommy Christian near that corner. One further inquiry was all he made.

Diagonally across from the great dry-goods shop into which Edith had gone while the little boy was stolen, is the Continental Hotel, and by the office door of that hotel was a periodical stand. Bowery Billy was known to the man who presided over this stand, and the latter willingly answered the boy's interrogations.

Like the policeman, this man had observed the richly dressed little boy and the shabby, long-haired Jonas. The boy was crying, but there was nothing in the Fagin's manner to excite suspicion.

"The kid was such a pretty one that I did go to the corner and look after them," the man said. "I didn't know but they might be going into the side door of the hotel, here. But no, they took a cab."

"Huh!" grunted Billy. "Didn't youse t'ink dat was funny—an' de man such a shabby guy?"

"Why—I never thought about it one way or the other."

"Had a cab waiting, heh?"

"Oh, no! At least, it didn't seem so. The shabby man talked some with the driver of the cab, as though he was bargaining."

"Did youse know him?"

"Who—the cabby?"

"Yep."

"No, no! I never saw him before."

"Den he wasn't a reg'lar hanger-out 'round here?"

"No. He happened to be drivin' through Twentieth Street this way——"

"Chee! Did dey cross Broadway again?"

"Oh, yes. Went west."

"All right, me covey! Dere's no use in tryin' ter find de cab, den. And it's me," he added to himself, as he turned away, "fer Mudder Manning's."

The last time Billy had been near Mrs. Manning's

home on the East Side he had heard the old woman and her circumstances discussed by a party of neighbors in a little grocery and delicatessen across the street from the big tenement in which Mrs. Manning dwelt. Billy started now for that very store.

The woman who kept it was evidently the repository for all the neighborhood gossip, and Billy knew well how to inveigle such people into talking. He might listen to a lot of information that was useless to him; yet along with the useless matter there was bound to turn just the facts that he desired—and all without the suspicion on the informer's part that he or she was being pumped.

This time, however, Billy went more directly to the issue than usual. He feared that he might be on a false clue; and if so, Jonas, the Fagin, was having all the more time to get away.

The woman who kept the grocery chanced to be disengaged when the Bowery boy appeared, and she could easily give him her attention.

"Say, missus!" opened the young detective, "d'youse know er old loidy livin' in dis neighborhood named Mannin'?"

"Shure, an' thot I do!" was the hearty declaration. "An' a foine ould lady she is."

"Say! dat can't be de one I'm lookin' fer. I'm erfraid dere's sumpin' queer erbout dis old skoit—'r erbout her folks."

"Thin, young man, th' person ye spake of an' ould Mrs. Mannin', what lives ercross the way, is two different parties."

"Are youse sure, loidy?"

"Oi am thot!" declared the woman, nodding her head. "Oi've known Mrs. Manning manny's th' year. In th' first place, she has no folks."

"None of her men folks ever was crooked, heh?"

"They were not. Her husband—Heaven rist his sowl—was as fine er man as ever laid a brick—an' he laid a manny av thim! He did well. He lift her a bit of money when he died, besides his pension."

"Well, mebbe dis ain't de same skoit, dough de one I mean had a husban' dat was a bricklayer."

"Shure, Timot'y Mannin' was a contr-r-ractor."

"Didn't she have a son?"

"She did thot."

"Well, there was a Manning went up de river from dis deestric'——"

"Ter Sing Sing, d'ye mean?"

"I do, missus."

"'Twas not Tim, Jr., thot went ter that wretched place, be th' powers! He was a foine bye. He was a pedler wit'er voice on him loike er stame-whistle. He did well. An' lift her money, too. She's got jist enough ter kape her aisy an' bury her."

"Say! is dis old skoit sickly?"

"Shure; there be days upon days she don't git out of th' house."

"How is she now?"

"Shure, she's better. 'Twas only herself spake ter me this mawnin' from across't th' strate.

"'Mrs. Finnegan, ma'am,' says she; 'it's falein' better Oi am th' day—an' will youse sind me over a quart of pertaties an' another pound of tay?' She had comp'ny, mind youse."

"She had a caller, did she?" interposed Billy, in just the right tone to encourage the woman to go on.

"Shure, it's a foine lady thot comes ter see her quite frequent. Oi didn't see her go in th' day; but I seen her come out after Mrs. Manning had spoke ter me—oh, yis, Oi seen her come out!"

"Dis Missus Mannin' I mean ain't likely ter have any stylish folks callin' on her," declared Billy slyly.

"Let me tell you, young man," declared the woman sternly, "that th' kind of a person you're ividently lookin' for does not reside in this block! We're all respectable, dacent bodies here, though we may be poor."

"This was quite a respectable party dat comes ter see de old goil, heh?" suggested Billy.

"She is, indade. She's a foine leddy, I tell yer! She often comes in a cab; an' sometimes she sinds Mrs. Manning out ter git th' air in her own hired cab—yis, indade!"

"But this mornin' de old skoit walked, did she?"

"I don't know how far she wint this mawnin'," grumbled the woman, feeling that Billy's inquiries were not friendly.

"And did the caller go erway on foot?" pursued the Bowery boy.

"She did, sir! Is there anything else you'd loike to know? Mebbe if youse run after th' leddy herself, she'd tell youse. She's not been gone long."

"T'anks," said Billy. "Dis Missus Mannin' youse tell me erbout can't be th' old critter I'm lookin' for," and he went out of the store.

And, really, as far as Billy could see, this character

given to Mrs. Manning did not fit his opinion of Madam Perroza's friend at all. He couldn't make the store-woman's story and what he suspected of Mrs. Manning "gibe" to save him.

"She soitenly has been doin' some of de madam's dirty woik, an' yet she's respected by dem dat knows her longest, an' dere ain't nottin' knowed ergainst her an' her folks.

"Well, chee! Dere warn't nottin' knowed ergainst Madam Perroza fer a good many years, I reckon. Yet she toined out er bad egg. An' she was usin' er disguise like de clo'es Mrs. Manning wears, ter hide Raddigan, her brudder, too——

"Green bananers!" ejaculated Billy suddenly, smiting his hands together. "What's dis I've fell ergainst? Have I struck er lead dat may be real pay-dirt—as me old friend, de man from Butte, useter say?

"Bowery Billy, wake up! Mebbe dere's a game dat youse have been nigh enough ter touch fer weeks, an' youse is only jest gettin' wise."

CHAPTER IV.

RUNNING DOWN A CLUE.

Bowery Billy might occasionally overlook a fine point in a series of circumstances; but not for long. Heretofore he had never had occasion to suspect this link between Madam Perroza and Mrs. Manning.

That the old woman was being used as a spy for the sister of Silent Jemmy Raddigan, Billy had ever believed. Madam Perroza had evidently wished to keep in touch with the Smalls after she was banished from the Madison Avenue mansion—perhaps for this very circumstance.

But Billy had a very vivid remembrance of the disguise used by Raddigan and found in the apartments of Madam Perroza. That disguise might still be used—not by Raddigan, however.

That very week Billy had heard through George Myrick that Raddigan had been spotted in Chicago and was wanted in that windy city for a piece of clever burglary committed since his escape from the penitentiary.

"Green bananers!" muttered Billy again. "Dis is openin' a new field for research ter me eyes. I must ha' been doped not ter suspected de game before. Ev'rybody gives dis old Manning skoit er clean bill ter de Fordham Heights Hall of Fame. I been lookin' ter find her queer; mebbe she's only simple, after all!"

With these ideas working in his head, Billy made his way into the tenement where Mrs. Manning lived, and inquired his way to her rooms. There he knocked several times before he received any response. Then Mrs. Manning hobbled to the door.

"Chee!" thought Billy, "if she's as lame as all dis, how kin she be runnin' de madam's errands?"

Billy's sharp eyes missed nothing of Mrs. Manning's appearance. He really had not been very close to her before.

"Well, boy, what is it?" asked the old woman, not unpleasantly.

She was in a warm woolen bed-gown or wrapper, and leaned heavily upon her cane. The little sitting-room Billy looked into was as neat as a new pin.

Billy had already planned what he should say, and he was glib enough.

"Wot's yer name, ma'am?" he asked.

"My name is Manning, boy. Mrs. Fanny Manning."

"Well, say! I gotter hunch dat youse has lost sumpin'. Is dat right—heh?"

"Lost something?" repeated the old woman, somewhat puzzled.

"Yep. Ain't yer?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Didn't youse drop somepin' w'en youse was out jest now?"

"Me? Why, I ain't been out to-day!" declared the old woman. "This is one of my bad days, boy. Come in! I can't stand for long because of my rheumatics. You sit down there and tell me what you mean, and I'll sit down here."

The old woman lowered herself groaning into a chair.

"I'm not often as bad as this. I thought it was something special when you knocked so long on my door. When I don't answer at once my neighbors know I'm lying down."

"I'm sorry ter bodder youse," said Billy. "But dere's sumpin' I'd like ter have explained, missus. An' dat's dis: If youse warn't out ter-day, who was it I seen come in here not an hour ago?"

"Come in here?"

"Sure!"

"Why, there has been only one caller to-day. A very good friend of mine, she is. Is—is there anything the matter?" asked Mrs. Manning doubtfully.

The old lady flushed a little and she looked troubled.

"I dunno as dere's anyt'ing de matter. But I soitenly t'ought youse was de party I seed."

"Oh, no, young man!"

"Well, mudder, I wouldn't say dat it was you if youse say not. But it looked like yer dress—de one I've seen youse wear w'en youse useter visit de Smalls' house on Madison Av'noo."

Mrs. Manning was undoubtedly disturbed by this statement. She shook her head vigorously.

"No, no, boy! you are mistaken. You only thought the lady's dress looked like mine. She—she is just a lodger of mine."

"Dat's it, is it?" queried Billy, with plain doubt expressed in his tone.

"Yes, yes. Not just a lodger. She is a lady who has had a serious misfortune. She has had a great come-down in the world."

"Huh?"

"She is poor now, and is forced to go out nursing. When she is not on a case she comes here. She hires that room of me," declared Mrs. Manning, pointing to a closed door. "She keeps her things there and pays me for the room right along. It really is a great help to a person like me."

"Well, where'll I find her?" demanded Billy.

"I—I can't tell you, boy. What do you want her for?"

Billy had turned grave and stared at the old woman for a minute in silence. He had never closely examined her countenance before. She had a placid, wrinkled face, with kindly, twinkling brown eyes, and a sweet old mouth that, even while she was so confused and so much troubled, smiled at him.

Billy's secret thoughts took this trend:

"Dis old loidy ain't de kind I been t'inkin' her, at all. It ain't in her ter do er mean t'ing—nix! I been barkin' up de wrong persimmon—an' dat's no dream."

"Chee! how easy 'tis fer a feller ter git an idee in his nut an' den go stumblin' erlong tryin' ter make ev'ryt'ing dat toins up fit inter de scheme he's doped out."

"Green bananers! dis old skoit ain't got it in her ter play de sneak on dat Edie goil—nix! De madam's her frien', all right, an' she feels grateful to her, but no money could make dis Missus Mannin' toin 'er dirty trick!"

"No, sir! she's bein' fooled. De madam's playin' hoky-poky wit' her—sure she is!"

Finally convinced on this point, Billy hitched his chair nearer to that of the old lady's, and after showing her

his police badge and explaining who he was, he told her why and how Madam Perroza had been obliged to leave the Smalls' house, and what kind of a woman she really was.

It was a blow to Mrs. Manning—a sore blow. She was an old-fashioned Irish lady, whose personal respectability was as dear to her—almost—as her life. That she should have innocently lent herself to the machinations of people who were not honest hurt her cruelly.

"I knew Madam Perroza when she was a girl—Mamie Raddigan she was. Yes! I knew her brother went wrong—poor lad! But Mamie married well, and I had no idea she ever had dealings with Jammy Raddigan.

"She's been that kind to me, too! She's sent me riding out through the park in 'er cab—yes, yes! She's been kind to an old woman. But only to use me, and my name, and my appearance, for base ends! Dear, dear! what wicked people there are in this world," moaned Mrs. Manning, wringing her hands.

She was ready then to hear what further the boy detective had to say. Madam Perroza kept her closet door, and the bureau standing in her room, locked. She came in often in her good clothes and changed them for other garments. Over this dress she wore a long cloak, and the innocent old woman had no suspicion that that dress was copied exactly from her own street costume. In the dark hall of the tenement she doubtless adjusted a gray wig and spectacles which she carried under her cloak. Madam Perroza's face was already made up to represent age. When she stepped out upon the street she was the exact representation of the old woman whom she patronized.

So thoroughly did the Bowery boy succeed in convincing Mrs. Manning that her lodger was crooked that she allowed him to get out and bring back a locksmith, who fitted keys to the bureau and closet.

It was easy then to make a search of Madam Perroza's possessions, which she kept at Mrs. Manning's; and suffice it for the present to say that what they found convinced Mrs. Manning that the story Billy told was true.

The old lady, however, was in tears by this time. That the madam, whom she had so long considered one of her best friends, should have used her for a bad purpose very nearly prostrated Mrs. Manning.

"Aw, chuck it!" grumbled Billy, much disturbed himself by the old woman's despair. "Let it go! Wot's de use of sportin' de foggy eye?"

"Young man!" sobbed the old woman, "I have been a respectable, honest person all my days. My husband was an honest man, and nobody ever said a word against my son."

"Wot's dat gotter do wit' it?" demanded Billy. "Nobody's accusin' youse of bein' crooked."

"But for me to take in somebody that the police are looking for——"

"Dat ain't your fault."

"But I suppose the police will come here now; and the neighbors will know all about it——"

"Cheer up! cheer up, old loidy!" exclaimed Billy. "If dat's wot's troublin' youse, I'll give yer a jolt right now dat'll make yer feel all ter de merry-merry."

"I—I don't just understand what you mean, young man," said the old lady.

"Not if I have my way, dey don't come here," declared Billy, shaking his head.

"Who?"

"De bulls. De cops."

"Why—how will you stop them?"

"I ain't goin' ter bring de reg'lar force inter it—not if I kin help. I tell yer I t'ink de madam is inter dis kidnapin' case, an' I tells yer w'y I t'inks so. Now, fer de sake of de little goil—Miss Edie, you know——"

"Sure, bless her sweet face! I'd want no harm to come to her," declared the old woman.

"Sure not! Well, for her sake we don't want de cops—an' dat means de poipers—ter git holt of de story. You say dat de madam said she'd be back to-morrer?"

"She did say that—the deceitful cat!"

"Sure! Well, an' she'll find a way of gittin' youse out of de house, heh?"

"She's promised me a ride through the park. Sure, I always thought 'twas out of the kindness of her heart she done it."

"Rats! Well, youse'll have er chance't ter pay her back fer some of her kindnesses—when she's been gallivantin' around in yer character—heh?"

Perhaps Mrs. Manning was not naturally vindictive, but a chance to "square accounts" with Madam Perroza did tempt her. She listened to what further Billy had to say and finally agreed to his plan.

Everything in the madam's room was left just as it had been found. Mrs. Manning promised to give her false friend no warning of Billy's visit.

"Keep mum, an' let me have me own way, an' I tells

yer honest I'll bring de game ter a quick finish wit'out havin' er cop in de place. I alwus keep we woid, Mrs. Mannin', an I'll play a lone hand in dis. Youse sha'n't be boddered a mite. All I wants is ter git de kid back an' hush de biz up—fer Miss Edie's sake.

"Youse an' me, Missus Mannin', will work tergedder, an' if we do we'll be er team dat can't be beat. S'long! I'm off ter give Miss Edie er sop of comfort ter keep her quiet."

This was not so easy a matter to accomplish as it was to promise, however. Billy found the girl in a sad state of self-condemnation.

"Oh, Billy, Billy!" she cried. "Have you found him?"

"Say! d'youse believe dat I'm de onliest detective in de bunch—dat Bowery Billy is de greatest ever?" demanded the boy, standing grinning before her.

"Billy! I'll swear that you're anything you like if you only assure me that Tommy's all right and that I shall see him again——"

"Aw, cripes, Miss Edie! Wot sort o' talk is dat? Of course youse'll see him ergin—an' all safe, too."

"But have you got him?"

"D' I look as dough I was hidin' him in me pocket?" demanded Billy, in disgust.

"Oh, don't tease me, Billy!"

"Never meant to, Miss Edie. But if I'd got de kid he'd be here wit' me, wouldn't he? Jest de same, I know erbout where he is, and to-morrer he'll be back here safe and right."

"Oh, Billy!"

"Sure he will. Now, hush, Miss Edie. Youse don't want er git yer name in de poipers, an' have er big splurge erbout it, do yer?"

"No, no!"

"Den we gotter wait till ter-morrer. Dat's de best I kin do fer youse. I tells yer honest, I've got copped out de guys wot's got Tommy. He won't be hoit er mite. And he'll be safe home ter-morrer."

"He has been kidnaped, then!"

"Well, he ain't stayin' erway from youse jest fer de sake er makin' yer feel bad—youse kin bet on dat. Of course he's bein' kept from youse by dem dat wants ter make money out o' his uncle. But we'll nip dat game in de bud an' git back de kid wit'in twenty-four hours—dat I promise youse, Miss Edie!"

"I shall just go crazy, Billy, if I have to wait in uncertainty."

"Say! didn't I jest tell youse I was de greatest detective dat was let out of de coop? Have some fait' in me, can't youse?"

"I know you'll do your best, Billy."

"Den dat's enough. My best is as good as any odder gazabo's best, youse kin bet on dat! Take it easy. Be cool. De boy's all right, and de least said erbout it, de easier it'll be fer us ter git him erway from dem dat's got him. Jest go on as dough nottin' had happened. Say! yer comin' down ter de blow-out ter-night, ain't youse?"

"Oh, Billy! How can I?" gasped Edith.

"I dunno how yer can. But I guess de street-cars'll be runnin'. You an' de perfessor's daughter kin find yer way, I reckon."

"Oh, Bessie is coming for me. Phil Erwin promised to bring her here, and take us both to your meeting. But, oh, Billy! how can I enjoy it when Tommy——"

"Aw, fergit it! fergit it!" interposed Billy, in vastly assumed disgust. "Youse don't have any fait' in me wonderful powers at all."

"But it seems so heartless——"

"Say, Miss Edie!" exclaimed Billy earnestly, "if I could do er livin' t'ing toward gittin' hold of Tommy fer youse between now an' ter-morrer mornin', youse bet I wouldn't show up wit' de N. G.'s meself ter-night. But t'ings has gotter lay in soak fer a few hours."

"Keep er stiff upper lip. Say nottin' ter nobody. Jest trust yer Uncle Bill, an' believe me w'en I says dat to-morrer before dis time Tommy Christian'll be home!"

Did Billy believe this confident statement himself? Well, he tried to! And he knew, too, that he would let no stone remain unturned in the work of bringing about the performance of his promise.

CHAPTER V.

A PUBLIC MEETING.

It was true, Edith Smalls had no heart for any fun or entertainment on the evening of Tommy Christian's disappearance; but when Bessie Hardress and Phil Erwin called for her she had no good excuse for not accompanying them.

In the first place, it had been owing to her often expressed curiosity and interest that the boys comprising the membership of the N. G.'s considered holding a "ladies' evening."

And then, Billy having forbidden her to take any soul into her confidence regarding Tommy's disappearance, she could not give his absence as an excuse for not accompanying her friends when the time came.

Besides, Edith was a very sweet-tempered, kind-hearted girl, and she knew that her refusal to go with Phil and Bessie would spoil their evening and lead them to worry about her. So she forced down her unhappy feelings and met them, when they arrived, with a pleasant greeting if not with as smiling a face as usual.

Phil, however, hurried them, for Bessie had taken some time to dress and they were late.

"Anybody would think you were going to attend a ball at the Waldorf," he laughed, as the girls now hurried to a car. "Goodness! the finest carpet you will tread on in our lodge-room is of shavings and sawdust. We believe in the simple life—at present. How we may branch out when the treasury becomes plethoric, is another matter."

"It's lots of fun, I think," said Miss Bessie Hardress, who was a pretty, vivacious girl, but not as young as Edith, "for you boys to have this society. Yet I don't really see why you need its influence, Mr. Erwin?"

The Westerner laughed.

"I fooled myself into believing that I joined it because it was Billy's idea, and because my influence might bring in some others."

"And now you're sorry?"

"Not a bit!"

"But you find that the helpfulness of a society that has for its main object the keeping of working boys honest and square in all their dealings, is not so much needed by you?"

"Why, to tell you the truth, I have found that very thing not a little beneficial. The society goes a little farther than your statement, Miss Bessie. But that really is the fundamental principle.

"We're down on grafting—in any form and to any extent. And I am just waking up to Billy's broadest meaning of that slang phrase.

"Graft is anything gained without exchange of an absolutely equal value. And it's rather odd how frequently I find myself, now that I am wearing this," added Phil, touching the badge on his vest—"questioning whether something that I have been accustomed to do in the past does not smack of grafting.

"The lodge is mainly, however, to impress on the minds

of those who work as office boys, messengers, and such, the fact that any emolument for doing anything which is not to their employers' interests, is dishonest.

"Billy hates graft as His Satanic Majesty is said to hate holy water. He claims it is the starting of more than seven-eighths of young criminals towards the penitentiary.

"Besides, money easily got, and for which one has not actually worked, is seldom of value to its possessor. These truths are some of those that Billy has worked into the by-laws and constitution, and the ritual of the order."

"But really, Mr. Erwin," said Miss Bessie, "that isn't the name of the lodge, is it?"

"What?"

"N. G.—No Good?"

"That's all the name I ever heard for it," declared Erwin, smiling broadly. "I must confess to you that I have not risen high enough in the order to know all its secrets yet. In that fertile brain of Billy's there may be mysteries that I have never dreamed of yet."

"But it's an awful name!" declared Bessie.

"I haven't said that the letters N. G. really stand for the name of the order," laughed Phil. "I know one thing: they stand for the watchword of the order."

"What is it?"

"Ah, that you will learn later, I fancy. We will not have an anticlimax to the evening's entertainment, if you please."

"Really, I'm feeling vastly curious!" cried Bessie. "Aren't you, Edie?"

"I've been awfully interested from the first," replied Miss Smalls.

"And what happens to-night?" queried Bessie again, of Phil.

"The principal work will be the initiation of a candidate for membership—Charlie Acton. Guess you've heard of him, Miss Edie?"

"Oh! the boy from Connecticut!"

"Yes. Billy has found him a job down here, and he thinks so much of Billy that if our Bowery friend told him to jump through this," and Phil held up his thumb and first finger in the shape of a circle, "Charlie would take a run and try to do it!"

"We all ought to have confidence in Billy!" declared Bessie Hardress. "I'll never doubt him after what he did for father about that horrid Paul Dare."

"Horrid Paul Dare!" repeated Edith, smiling. "I thought Mr. Dare was one of your greatest admirers. And think of all the money he is making from his invention."

"I shall never be able to think of him as anything but Mr. Nobody of Nowhere," returned her friend, laughing ruefully. "And what Billy and Mr. Erwin, here did for us then——"

"Oh, Billy's always doing something fine," interposed Phil, hurriedly.

"Listen to the Boosters' Chorus," said Edith.

But she felt better herself, being reminded of Billy Barlow's former successes. She began to be more hopeful of what the morrow should bring forth.

"Here we are, ladies," Phil said, finally, as they were half-way through a rather dark block, having left the car a few minutes before.

Bessie looked up at the tall plank gate between the two brick houses and said, laughingly:

"'Leave hope behind all ye who enter here.' My! doesn't this seem mysterious?"

Phil had already rung the bell, and in a moment the small door in the big gate opened as though of its own volition.

"Ugh! it's dark!" shivered Bessie, looking into the lane.

"Courage is the first necessity of all who enter the precincts of the order," declared Phil, solemnly.

"No tricks, Phil!" commanded Edith, first to step into the dark alley.

"My sacred word of honor, ladies, that you shall not be frightened in entering this Inferno," declared Phil, entering after the girls and closing the door.

He led them by the hand toward the court behind the houses.

"At least, it seems nothing worse than a stable-yard!" whispered Bessie nervously.

"Sh! sh!" admonished Edith, clinging close to Phil. "This is—is really scary, Phil!"

The latter chuckled; but then assumed his dignity and suddenly knocked six times by twos upon a resounding door. The knocking echoed in the courtyard.

"Gracious!" murmured Miss Bessie.

From within Phil's knocks were repeated more lightly, and young Erwin whispered his number through the key-hole:

"Number Three."

The girls heard a drawling voice behind the door exclaim:

"Bah Jove! here the fellah is at last!" Then the speaker's tone changed to one of solemnity, and he asked:

"Is Number Three alone?"

"I declare!" whispered Edith to Bessie. "That is Georgie Golightly—I'd know his voice anywhere."

"Sh!" admonished Phil, and then replied in the usual way to the inquiry of the doughty Outer Guard:

"Number Three comes seeking admission with friends of the order."

The usual questions and answers which followed, according to the ritual, were exchanged, and finally the door opened and they were admitted into the half-lighted anteroom.

"Oh!" squealed Bessie, when she beheld the tall masked and robed figure of the Outer Guard.

But the boys refused to relax from the usual dignity of the proceedings. Having been identified by the Outer Guard and exchanging grips with him, Phil was solemnly instructed as to the initials of the password of the evening: "B. T. T. S."

At the Inner Gate the masked head of another black-robed figure appeared when Phil (quickly robed and masked himself) now knocked. Phil repeated the password to the porter of the gate, and ushered the girls into the better lighted room beyond.

There they found a row of likewise masked and robed figures occupying chairs along two sides of the room. One person at the secretary's table Edith knew must be Mace Soloway. Another masked figure sat on the raised dais at the end opposite the door. Near the door were several chairs, evidently for guests, for in one sat a rather nice-looking, though retiring fellow, without either mask or robe.

"Sit down! sit down!" whispered Phil to the girls. "We're late and the boys are impatient. This is Charlie Acton! Acton, Miss Edie Smalls, and Miss Bessie Hardress."

"Number Three! we're waiting for you," exclaimed the masked figure who occupied the dais, beckoning Phil forward.

"All right!" exclaimed Erwin, and hurried to take the other's place in the chair.

"There was another visitor expected," observed the chairman, pro tem.: "but Number Two, who was to bring her, ain't showed up. Better git busy."

"That's Billy," whispered Edith to Bessie. "My! you don't know any of them in those disguises till they speak, do you?"

The opening of a public lodge-meeting must, of necessity, be somewhat different from that of the secret meetings of the order. Matters of business are side-tracked, as are all reports and the reading of the minutes of the previous session.

Billy and Phil together had invented an interesting and not unimpressive ceremony, and the girls who may secretly have come expecting to joke the boys not a little about the order, found nothing to giggle at, to say the least.

For instance, the part of the ritual dealing with the explanation of the letters of the password, B. T. T. S., particularly interested the visitors.

Phil Erwin, as Chairman, or Chief Justice, arose, commanded silence with a rap of the gavel, and said:

"Brothers, as we entered the meeting-room of our order to-night, each was admitted only upon repeating the password chosen for the evening, in the ear of the Porter of the Inner Gate. The password to-night is——?"

"B. T. T. S.," was the chorused answer of the members of the order.

"Right. As was the case with the passwords at former meetings, these letters stand for an important phrase—the password is something chosen because it can be helpful to us between now and our next meeting. I call on our Senior Instructor to fulfil the duties of his office and explain to the brethren the meaning of B. T. T. S."

One of the masked figures arose instantly and the visitors knew it was Billy, although he spoke without once using the free-and-easy vocabulary with which he usually expressed himself.

"There was a fellow once who worked in a big private banking-house. It wasn't in this country, but in a foreign land, and business wasn't run there just as it is here.

"This chap had a small position in the bank, and he never touched any of the money—excepting what was coming to him in his pay-envelope on a Saturday.

"But he was poor, and he needed money. His folks were sick at home, and he was the only one bringing in any money. Oh, he was mighty poor!

"He used to see the clerks bringing down the boxes

of bank-notes and bags of coin in the evening to put them into the vault, for he worked at a desk within sight of the open doors of the vault. He saw this money taken out, and put in again, day after day, till he fairly got hungry for some of it.

"He needed it so, you see. Not for himself, but for his folks. And a little of all those thousands would have quite set him and his folks up. Anyway, it would have tided them over their hard spell.

"One evening a clerk carrying an iron box piled high with packages of bank-notes stopped and rested his burden on a corner of this humble clerk's desk. One of the tiniest of the packages slipped off and fell among some papers on the desk. Neither of them saw it at the moment.

"The bell in the roof of the old building tolled one! The other clerks came scurrying with the money from every department, for at the third stroke every penny was supposed to be in the vault for the night, and one of the responsible officers of the concern locked the great vault doors.

"The clerk who had dropped the packet of money went on to the vault without discovering his loss. His money had been counted and was all straight. It was handed into its proper place in the vault.

"Then the humble clerk chanced to move a paper and there lay the packet of bank-notes!

"He started to grab it up and run after the other clerk. Then he looked around and saw that nobody had observed him, or had seen the money. He let the paper that had covered it fall over the money again!

"The money would not be missed until morning. It would be the easiest thing in the world to slip it into his pocket. He would never be suspected, for he knew by the number of the packet that the sum was not very large and the notes small ones and easily disposed of. But it would be a fortune to him.

"And then the bell tolled two!

"The loss could never be traced to him, and he needed the money. Every other man in the bank might be suspected before him, for he never touched a penny of the bank's funds. A minute longer and it would be impossible to have the packet put away that day, anyway, for on the third stroke of the bell the vault doors were shut.

"He had to decide then—he had to decide quickly—he had to decide finally—*before the third stroke!*" pursued Billy with great emphasis, and the girls looked at each

other and nodded, for they believed that those words fulfilled the meaning of the initials of the password.

"Before the third stroke," repeated Billy, "he must decide. He was an honest man then; unless he gave up the packet he would be a thief on the third stroke of the bell.

"And while he wrestled in his mind with this great temptation, the words for which the letters of our password stand came into his thought. And remembering those words he could not fall. He ran and gave the money to the man guarding the vault—and the bell tolled for the third time.

"He had been true to self. And that is the meaning of the letters of our password to-night, brothers: 'BE TRUE TO SELF!'"

Phil rapped twice with his gavel as Billy finished his story, the boys rose, and in chorus repeated the password:

"Be true to self."

"I think that's just splendid!" whispered Bessie to Edith, and her friend nodded and pressed her hand. She was too proud of Billy just then to speak.

CHAPTER VI.

EDITH HAS A LOSS.

Immediately following the ceremony of the password, Number Seven, or Jack Marston, called the attention of the Chief Justice, or Chairman, to the fact that there were those present in the room who did not belong to the order.

Thus officially made cognizant of the presence of visitors, the Chief Justice declared an intermission while the boys were made acquainted with the two young ladies. They had all met Charlie Acton before.

Word was given to unmask, and all the pointed caps were whipped off, although the members remained robed for the further ceremonies of the evening.

Bessie Hardress had seen very few of the boys; even Jack Marston was a stranger to her, although she had met Thede once at Phil's rooms. Smitchy Burke and Jonah rather astonished the professor's daughter, for both worked hard for small pay and were not well dressed. Smitchy never could keep his hands clean, and it was a wonder if his face bore no streaks of blacking!

Fortunately the robes, which were all alike, hid the deficiencies of garments on the part of the poorer members of the order.

Edith got along better with the boys, for she had long been used to Billy and Sharpie (who was not here to-night, by the way) and had seen most of the others.

"Goodness!" whispered Miss Hardress. "What a contrast there is between Mr. Golightly, for instance, and that Burke boy."

"Well, I suppose somebody has to black boots," laughed Edith. "And Billy always declares he's a bootblack by trade."

"Ye-es. But then, it doesn't seem as though that Burke boy and Mr. Soloway and Mr. Golightly—or Mr. Erwin—would have anything in common."

"I don't know. Perhaps, as Phil says, the very help that these poor working boys need is help for the richer ones, too. I'm sure it won't hurt Mace Soloway to fraternize with boys who work for their living. He never earned a dollar in his life!"

"You're very hard on Mace," laughed Bessie.

"I hate a drone!" declared the energetic Miss Edith.

All this conversation was carried on in whispers between the times when the more or less bashful boys came to speak to their visitors. Phil would not let one escape. Even Jonah had to shake hands with Edith and Bessie.

The latter whispered to her friend:

"Now that boy doesn't look honest to me. I'm sure he stared all the time at your pin." Edith was wearing a very handsome diamond pin that her uncle had given her on her last birthday.

"You can't expect every boy to be nice looking," objected Edith. "And poor Jonah was nothing but a wharf-rat when Billy picked him up and got him a job."

"Just the same," whispered Bessie, "I've slipped my ruby ring into the pocket of my dress. It's a little loose for me, anyway, and I wouldn't want to drop it here."

"Oh, you be still!" commanded Edith.

The boys were jollying Acton a good bit on his coming ordeal. He was to be initiated, and Billy's surprises in the way of initiation were never known beforehand. At every noise from outside the building Acton started, for he remembered vividly how Thistle Tom had been initiated, for he had been present at that famous trial over the purchase of the feather pillows.

"That's the goat trying to butt his way in!" declared Thistle, grinning, as he saw Charlie Acton jump. "Oh, you'll get yours before the evening's over!"

An incident happened, however, that quite put out of

their minds the expected ceremony of initiation—an incident that cast over the proceedings a sudden gloom. The entertainment committee had furnished a little spread, but this time they did not go up into Billy's rooms for it; it was handed around on plates in the lodge-room instead.

In the midst of the fun and laughter, Bessie Hardress, who had turned to look at Edith, suddenly uttered a scream.

"Edith!"

"For pity's sake, how you frighten one!" exclaimed Miss Smalls, as the boys stopped eating and talking to gaze upon the excited girl.

"It's gone!" cried Miss Hardress dramatically.

"Well! goodness knows I am glad it's gone—whatever it is—if it makes you squeal like that," responded Edith.

"What's the matter, Miss Bessie?" asked Phil, from the other end of the room.

"Your pin!" exclaimed Bessie even more tragically, pointing at Edith.

The younger girl's hand flew to her throat where the diamond pin had held together the lace which trimmed her gown there. It was gone!

"What did I tell you?" demanded Bessie aloud.

"Hush!" commanded Edith.

Much as she had thought of her uncle's present, she would have been tempted to say nothing about the loss of the piece of jewelry if her friend had not drawn all this attention to it.

"Wha'chu lost, Miss Edie?" demanded Billy, with his mouth full.

"What's the matter?" chorused the others.

"I—I—my pin's gone," said Edith faintly.

"You've dropped it," suggested Phil Erwin. "That pretty pin Cap'n Ben gave you, you mean?"

"Yes."

"It wouldn't drop out so easily," declared Bessie Hardress before Edith could stop her. "It had a patent clasp."

"Sure you had it when you came in?" demanded Phil.

"Of course she had," said Thede Marston.

"I saw it—'twas a little beauty," remarked Dan Reilly.

"And I saw it," observed others of the boys, in chorus.

A sudden silence fell over the company, and several of the boys looked at each other doubtfully. It was an awkward moment.

"I—I must have dropped it, somehow," said Edith faintly, her pretty face rosy and her eyes filled with tears.

She felt the awkwardness of the situation even more than the boys.

"You couldn't have dropped it, Edith Smalls!" declared Bessie tartly.

"Oh, I might of——"

"Nonsense!"

"Wait a moment," interposed Phil seriously. "Miss Bessie seems to intimate that the pin could not have accidentally been lost. That is rather a serious suggestion, you know."

Bessie was silent, and flushed as hotly as Edith. Neither of the girls could speak.

"I am dreadfully sorry that anything like this should have occurred," Phil pursued gravely. "We will have to do the right thing, of course."

"Why, Phil, old man, you don't believe anybody here would have taken Miss Edith's pin, not even for a joke—do you?" blurted out Thede Marston.

"Preposterous!" gasped Golightly.

"Of course not! Shut up, Thede, you chump!" from Jack angrily.

"Wait a moment—wait a moment," cried Phil. "What do you say, Billy?"

Billy had not uttered a word yet. And he did not speak altogether like Billy Barlow when he finally opened his lips. He stared straight ahead of him as he spoke, and refused to look at any of the boys.

"There ain't but one thing ter do, Philly. I know wot youse'd say. An' yer right. Dat was er vallible pin—I noticed it. We ain't none of us angels. Anyway, dem dat knows dey is innercent won't object——"

"To what?" cried Thede angrily.

"Ter bein' searched, you chump!" responded Billy hotly.

"Oh, no, Billy! Don't do that!" cried Edith, starting up.

"Hold on, Miss Edie!" commanded Billy. "Dis is sumpin' dat de N. G.'s can't stand for. It's up ter me jest as much as it is ter anybody in dis crowd. I guess if I kin stand bein' frisked, de odders kin. Youse kin go t'roo my clo'es foist, Phil."

"I refuse, Billy!" exclaimed young Erwin, flushing.

"Naw, yer don't. Dere's less reason fer youse ter swipe such er t'ing dan anybody else here——"

"I like your gall, Billy!" interrupted the angry Thede.

"Well, you can stand it if he can," said Jack.

"How about yourself?" growled Thede.

"Hold on, hold on!" ejaculated Phil. "Perhaps this would be best. I do not believe anybody has stolen Miss Edie's pin——"

"Oh, Phil Erwin! don't say such things," gasped Edith. "Of course it has dropped out——"

Miss Hardress sniffed audibly and stared hard at Jonah and Smitchy Burke, who happened to be sitting side by side.

"Wait!" commanded Phil. "I must be searched, too. George shall search me, and then I will search him. You'll stand for that, Golightly?"

"Well, Erwin, I think it's a shame," grumbled the baby giant. "But I don't consider myself any better than any other fellow here. I'm game, deah boy!"

"Very well," said Phil, still with gravity. "We'll retire to the other room. When we have searched each other you must each stand for the same treatment. Meanwhile, look around the floor near where Miss Edie has been sitting. It might have dropped, you know."

"Then somebody must have dropped it purposely," muttered Bessie.

They all tried to ignore her, but a most embarrassing silence fell over the company while Phil and Georgie were absent. In a few minutes Phil appeared at the door.

"Mr. Golightly has found no pin upon me, and I can assure you that he hasn't it," Phil said gravely.

"I'm next," exclaimed Billy, and jumped up quickly.

He went into the anteroom and was gone some minutes.

"I feel horrible," whispered Edith to Bessie. "I—I wish I hadn't come."

"I never have wholly approved of this thing," declared the professor's daughter.

"It's awful!" murmured the younger girl.

"Next!" said Billy, coming out. "Dey frisked me, all right, all right. I reckon youse has been showin' 'em how it's done at de station, Dan."

"I'll take me turn next, Billy," said the young policeman. "It's a shame, though."

He went inside and came out with a clean bill of health.

"Come on. Take yer medicine in rotation," exclaimed Billy. "We've all gotter do it, unless de pin is found. The feller next to the door."

This happened to be Acton, and he rose, blushing furiously.

"Aw, cripes, Billy!" exclaimed Thistle Tom, who had

been sitting beside him. "Charlie's a visitor. It ain't fair."

"Oh, yes!" exclaimed Acton hastily. "I wouldn't feel right to be omitted. It—it's just as fair for me as for anybody."

But he went very slowly toward the door.

"I never would believe he took it," murmured Miss Bessie.

"Mebbe youse is right, Thistle," said Billy slowly, as Acton still hesitated, as though he would very willingly be excused from the ordeal.

But just then Phil appeared.

"Nobody can afford to dodge this," he said sharply. "Come on, Mr. Acton. Understand, we are treating you just as fairly as we do anybody in the room."

Acton was urged inside, and the door banged shut. In half a minute there was a sudden exclamation from Golightly—and then a cry from Charlie. Everybody in the bigger room looked startled. The door was flung open, and Phil, very red in the face and holding to the struggling Acton, appeared.

"Drop it, Phil! Let the poor beggar go!" Golightly was heard to whisper shrilly from the rear.

"No, sir!" exclaimed young Erwin very sternly. "This is disgraceful! We have all suffered suspicion because of the action of this—this——"

Words seemed to fail him. The miserable Acton fairly wilted in his hands. Phil had to drag him into the room.

"I never, I never did it!" he wailed. "I tell you I don't know anything about it."

Both girls were on their feet, and Edith cried out in horror:

"Oh, let him go! Never mind the pin, Phil. Let him go!"

CHAPTER VII.

SHARPIE REPORTS.

The horrified boys stared at each other and at the miserable Acton. Billy finally found his voice.

"Green bananers!" he exclaimed. "D'youse mean ter say youse found it on him, Philly?"

"We certainly did. Here is the pin," said Phil, holding it up. "It was in his pocket—and well hidden, too."

"That's right," said Golightly, nodding gravely.

"Say!" exclaimed Thistle Tom angrily, suddenly breaking into the proceedings, "I don't believe dat Charlie

Acton had anything to do with that pin. He never stole it!"

"It's brave of you to say that, Thistle," said Billy doubtfully.

"Anyway," declared Thistle Tom, suddenly striking an oratorical attitude, "he's asked to join this order, and when a feller does that there's something coming to him, ain't there?"

The general appearance of the boys and the expressions on their faces changed. Even Acton himself suddenly stood upright, and the color flashed back into his cheek. Phil let him go, and stepped back.

"As a candidate for admission to this order," said Thistle Tom, "we believe he has certain rights. What are they, brothers?"

Instantly, in chorus, every member of the N. G.'s chanted as follows:

"A right to speak in his own defense; a right to be defended by counsel; a right to be tried by a jury of the brothers of the order."

Thistle Tom, as the member introducing the candidate, said: "Such being the rights claimed for this candidate, I demand to know if it is the will of the order that he be tried on the charge here and now, and before the Chief Justice of the order?"

"It is!" chorused the boys.

"Right," observed the serious Thistle. "Let the candidate wait in the lodge-room the convening of the court."

"Oh, oh!" gasped Edith. "It's all the initiation!"

"My goodness!" returned Bessie, unable to express herself further.

"You fellows might as well kill a chap and be done with it, as to frighten him to death," complained Acton, weakly sitting down in the nearest chair.

At this the members of the order filed out with great hilarity. But when they came in, the court was solemnly convened, and the trial was conducted by Jack Marston as prosecutor, and Billy as volunteer counsel for the defense, with great earnestness.

The witnesses had learned their parts well, and the cross-examination of some of them proved very funny indeed. Even Bessie Hardress got over her embarrassment after a while and laughed as honestly as Edith at the fun.

How the pin had been extracted from Edith's collar and found its way into Acton's pocket was never really explained to the visitors. But when it looked darkest for

the prisoner, and the evidence seemed to conclusively prove him guilty, a messenger arrived with certain testimony that completely exonerated the accused. As before, when Thistle Tom had been tried, the guilt was laid upon the shoulders of one "Solomon Shooks"; the pin of the order was placed upon Acton's breast, and as Phil had promised the girls on their way to the meeting, they learned at least one meaning of the letters N. G.—the watchword of the order—"Never Graft!"

The girls—after Bessie recovered her composure—were enthusiastic in their praises. Certainly such parts of the ritual of the order as they heard, and the general character of the entertainment, had been very enjoyable indeed.

"I wouldn't have missed it for anything, Billy," declared Edith, with warmth. "Though you did scare me awfully about my pin."

"And I'll never forgive you for it, Mr. Barlow!" said Bessie Hardress, making a little face at him. "You made me say things that I'm sorry for."

"Chee! don't youse never git it inter yer head dat folks kin make yer say wot ain't in yer heart," declared Billy, with some sharpness. "I seen yer sizin' up Smitchy Burke, an' Jonah, an' some of de odders, an' if youse hadn't made up yer mind in de foist place dat dey warn't ter be trusted, youse'd never been so free ter t'ink dat yer jool'ry warn't safe here."

"Oh, Billy! I'm covered with confusion," declared the professor's daughter. "Don't rub it in."

"Dat's all right. Skoits is alwus dat way," grunted Billy. "Dey t'inks more erbout wedder er feller's hair is parted right, an' if his neck's clean, dan anyt'ing else."

"Dese kids dat come here, some of 'em, don't put on no dog; but, green bananers! dey're wort' more dan some of de near-silks dat youse meet ev'ry day up-town. Mebbe dey ain't in de monkey-dinner class, an' all dat, an' wouldn't know wot ter do wit' er orange-spoon; but dey're reg'lar Newfoundling dorgs w'en it comes ter bein' fait'ful ter a frien'—betcher life!"

As he spoke this eulogy, there was a sudden pounding on the outer door of the carpenter's shop. As the session of the lodge was already concluded, the nearest boy to the door opened it. In dashed Sharpie and sought Billy breathlessly.

"Well, well!" grunted the Bowery boy. "W'ere did youse-blow in from? Wot's de matter now?"

"I couldn't git here before," declared Sharpie. "An'

I s'pose Mag'll be so mad she'll spit fire w'en I git down ter Blinders. She counted on comin' up here ter-night, Billy."

"W'y didn't youse fix it so't Smitch or me would go after her?"

"Aw, cheese it! I didn't expec' I'd need anybody ter do me own job," grunted Sharpie.

"Wot's de matter? W'y didn't youse git here earlier?"

"I wasn't let."

"Heh? How's dat?"

"I couldn't git here, I tell yer!"

"Wot does dat mean, Sharpie?" demanded Billy, looking at his protégé with disfavor. "Who was stoppin' youse?"

At that moment Edith, who had been watching them, followed them into the corner to which Billy and Sharpie had retired.

"What does he say, Billy?" demanded the young girl anxiously.

"Huh? Wot's de matter, Miss Edie?" asked Billy, rather taken aback.

"Oh, you can't fool me, Billy!" cried Edith. "I know that Sharpie has been helping you. Of course he has! He'd be just the one you'd send to try to hunt up Tommy. Oh, Sharpie! did you find him?"

Sharpie never said a word, and looked at Billy for permission to speak.

"Tell me, Sharpie!" begged Edith. "Is he well? Have they hurt him?"

"Aw, cheese it! Have dey hoit who?" drawled Sharpie, seeing no permission in Billy's face, but awfully embarrassed as Edith clutched his arm tightly.

"Billy! Billy! don't be cruel to me!" cried the girl. "Let him speak. I must know the truth."

Billy's own eyes were boring holes in Sharpie. "What is it, kid?" he growled. "Is it all right?"

"Sure!" declared Sharpie, with sudden vivacity.

"Tommy's all right, ain't he?"

"Sure he is!" repeated Sharpie, with a gulp.

"All dem guys is doin' is ter hold him fer ransom, ain't it?"

"Sure!" repeated Sharpie again.

Edith turned suddenly and seized Billy by the shoulder. She fairly shook him.

"Stop it, Billy!" she cried, her voice breaking. "You are trying to fool me, and you are making the boy lie."

"Green bananers!"

"Aren't you ashamed? Maybe you think you are doing me a kindness, but you're not!"

"Aw, cheese it, Billy! I did me best," grumbled Sharpie.

"Don't you blame him, Billy!" commanded the girl again. "Let him tell the truth. I can bear anything better than uncertainty."

"Sh!" commanded Billy. "Wait. Dis ain't de way fer youse ter act, Miss Edie."

"Then don't treat me like a child!" cried the girl, with a stamp of her little foot.

All this, however, had passed unnoticed by most of the others. Billy knew that in another moment the general attention of the company would be drawn to them.

"Come on!" he said. "Youse come up inter my rooms—bot' of youse. Git a move on, now!"

He opened a door beside him and hustled both Sharpie and Edith out into the yard of his lodging-house. He ushered them across this court, and up the rear stairway into his own rooms.

"Open up, Sharpie," he said briskly, when they were seated. "It ain't no use tryin' ter keep nottin' from a goil. Dey alwus gits de best of youse. An' if dey t'inks yer ain't givin' it all to dem, dey says yer lies!"

"Oh, Billy, forgive me!" cried Edith. "I didn't mean just that."

"I'll see erbout forgivin' youse later. Git busy, Sharpie. Let's hear de woist."

Sharpie consulted his wits for a moment, and then blurted out what he considered to be the "worst."

"Jonas has got him!"

"Oh!" cried Edith, who very well knew who Jonas was.

"Well, dat ain't such astonishin' news, Sharpie, old boy," returned Billy calmly.

"But dis ain't no Fagin game," pursued Sharpie. "He ain't got no odder kids in his ken."

"Did you see Tommy? Is he safe?" cried Edith.

"Say! dey're feedin' him on ice-cream an' lady-fingers, an' odderwise treatin' him de best ever," grunted Billy. "Don't be erfraid, Miss Edie. Dey won't hurt him. He's wort' too much to 'em."

"Don't be cruel, Billy!"

"Don't youse be foolish, den. Go on, kid!"

"It wasn't so easy gittin' nex' ter Jonas dis time. I'd been longer findin' him, I reckon, if I hadn't seed him by accident las' week w'en we was spottin' dat frog-eater."

"Oh! youse mean Henri Blount?"

"Yep. Jonas is trainin' wit' de Frenchies. I seed him dat time down in de Ladore Café, on Twenty-fourth Street."

"Yep. I knows de joint—an' de couple wot runs it," declared Billy. "It don't have no good name."

"Well, w'en Henri was pinched it kinder put er crimp inter de guns wot's been hangin' erbout dat joint, an' dey skiddoos," pursued Sharpie.

"I had ter dig eround a good bit before I found any geezer dat would drop er woid erbout Jonas. An' I on'y done it by sayin' dat I was er kid dat he useter train, an' dat I had a message fer him from anudder gun."

"Hub!" ejaculated Billy, shaking his head.

"Yep. I knowed it was er bad break. But wot could I do?" demanded Sharpie. "Dem dat knowed where Jonas was hidin' was as close-mouthed as clams, an' don't youse fergit it."

"Well, de way I got to him was t'roo er feller wot tends bar in a place at de corner of Twenty-fourth an' de avenue——"

"I know dat joint!" muttered Billy. "An' a wicked one it is."

"Betcher life! But dere ain't much doin' dese days. It was quiet enough dis aft, an' de feller said dat if I was sure-nough er sport an' had er message fer Jonas, mebbe he could fix it fer me."

"I says: 'Betcher life I be! An' dis is mighty important, too.'"

"It's gotter be," says de guy, 'or sumpin'll happen ter youse.'

"It's sumpin' Jonas oughter know right now," says I.

"Erbout de kid?" says he, slylike.

"But I didn't bite on dat apple. Says I: 'Wot kid's dis? Has Jonas got er Fagin shop again?'"

"So he was kinder fooled, an' says he'll fix it fer me. He telephones to somebody, an' speaks French, so wot he says I dunno. By-me-by er goil comes inter de back room of de place an' de barkeep goes in ter see her. In er minnit he calls me in."

"So dat's de kid, is it?" says she. "He looks too smart," and Sharpie grinned broadly.

"Don't be t'rowin' bouquets at yerself," grunted Billy.

"Aw right. I ain't t'inkin' meself any too smart," declared his protégé, shaking his head. "Listen ter wot was handed me."

"De geezer says ter her: 'Youse do like wot youse was told, an' nobody won't call yer down, no matter how smart de kid is.'"

"Aw right," says she, an' den she nods ter me an' says: 'Come on.'

"I wanter see Jonas. I dunno youse," says I.

"Youse'll see Jonas, all right, all right," says she—an' I did!" declared Sharpie, in disgust.

"Yer walked inter a trap, did yer?" demanded Billy, grinning.

"Sure! But how could I help it? I was playin' ter find out w're de geezer was hidin' himself erway, an' if he had Tommy wit' him. I seed dese folks knowed wot Jonas' game was, an' I was rubberin' ter find out where he'd stowed Tommy erway, an' how many of dem dere was in de deal."

"But did you see Tommy?" interrupted Edith.

"Naw! I didn't see nobody. But Jonas seed me. And he's on, all right, all right!"

"On to what?" demanded Billy quickly.

"Dat I'm trainin' wit' youse now."

"How d'youse know dat?" demanded the Bowery boy.

"Well, lemme tell yer wot dey does ter me. De goil took me inter a house right dere on Twenty-fourth Street, an' up-stairs ter de top floor, an' inter a middle room. It was like er sittin'-room, an' was lit be a gas-jet."

"You waits fer him here," says she, an' goes out, an' de minnit de door swung to behind her I knowed I was in er box. I heard a spring-lock snap."

"You're a dandy!" growled Billy.

"I'd like ter know how you'd ha' done better," returned Sharpie, in wrath. "I was up agin' it, an' dere wasn't no use in makin' a holler, I knowed. I sat down. I didn't try ter git out."

"By'em-by de door opens er crack, an' I seed Jonas himself lookin' in."

"Hullo, bo!" says I.

"Yes, dat's him," says Jonas ter some geezer outside. 'I t'ought it was. He's ter stay here till ter-morrer night—see?'"

"Aw right," says de party outside.

"Den Jonas grins at me ergin, an' says: 'Give me regards ter Bowery Billy, an' yer better change yer name,' says he, an' shuts de door again. Aw, cheese it! I felt like punk—I did!"

"Sure! I should t'ink youse would," returned Billy.

"Oh, Billy! what could he do?" cried Edith.

"He needn't ha' been so blessed green as to git put inter a room like dat. Well, what happened yer?"

"Dey toined de gas off from outside; but I'd seed sumpin' foist," said Sharpie. "De ceilin' was papered over, but in one place was er square place like de water had leaked in eround de edge of a trap-door. I was up nex' ter de roof, yer see, an' it didn't take me long ter figger it out.

"I piles up de furniture an' climbs up, busts t'roo de paper, an' sees dat I'm right. Dere's an old board shutter, an' it's nailed down. I was woikin' on dat since erbout six o'clock, an' I never got t'roo till erbout an hour ago.

"Dat's all dere is to it," concluded Sharpie. "I comes down de fire-escape on de nex' house an' beats it down here. Jonas ain't fur from dem corners; he's got de kid, an' he's goin' ter dispose of Tommy some time ter-morrer—dat's sure."

"How can you be so confident of that, Sharpie?" demanded Edith.

"'Cause he told 'em ter keep me close till ter-morrer night."

"Oh, Billy! what will that wicked man do with him?"

"He'll hand him over to me," said Billy, grinning.

"To you!"

"Sure."

"How confident you speak, Billy," murmured Edith.

"Betcher life I am. Dis dat Sharpie tells me dove-tails right inter wot I found out already. Lemme repeat, Miss Edie: Tommy'll be at home ter-morrer artemnoon, for sure. Have fait' in yer Uncle Bill, an' it'll come out all right.

"Now, let's git back ter de lodge-room before dey comes huntin' for us. Straighten up, Miss Edie. Don't let 'em see youse has been cryin'."

And Billy led the way back to the carpenter's shop in the rear of the house in which he lodged.

CHAPTER VIII.

AN UNEXPECTED CIRCUS.

The crowd had missed them, and Bessie Hardress was impatiently awaiting Edith, to go home. Phil Erwin beckoned Billy aside.

"Get your hat, old man, and come along with the ladies. Golightly and Mace are putting a game up on us."

"How's dat?" demanded the Bowery boy.

"Mace has got his machine over to a stable or garage on the avenue, and those two dudes have slipped off to bring it around to the gate and offer to take the girls home. Don't say a word! Get 'em out quick, and we'll fool 'em."

Billy was game for that, all right, and when Bessie said "Hurry!" he did nothing to hold the visitors back. Both girls had enjoyed themselves; but Edith was much perturbed now over Tommy's captivity, and the professor's daughter wished to hurry home.

"I don't know where Mr. Golightly and Mr. Soloway went," declared Miss Bessie, as they went forth. "Mr. Soloway was very mysterious just a few minutes ago. He begged me to tell you to wait for him."

"Oh, I can't be bored to-night," declared Miss Smalls, in some impatience. "Mace isn't here now, is he?" she asked, looking around.

"I don't see him none," declared Billy. "Philly an' me's goin' ter see dat youse git home wit'out bein' chased. Come erlong!"

"I'm not sure but that they expected us to wait," observed Bessie doubtfully.

"It is too late to wait," declared Edith, and started off with Billy at once.

There was nothing left for Miss Hardress to do but to take Phil's arm and follow.

"I really wouldn't like to offend Mr. Golightly," she murmured to the Westerner. "He's such a nice fellow."

Phil chuckled. "I reckon he figures on cutting Billy and me out," he remarked. "But those two dudes will have to wake up earlier in the day—goodness! what's that?"

At the moment there was an excited squeal from Edith and a cry from Billy. They had almost reached the Third Avenue corner, and the sudden banging of a car-gong had startled the echoes of the quiet street.

"Look there!" gasped Bessie, in terror.

A down-town car, driven at a furious rate of speed, dashed into view. There was some slight pitch to the street-grade here, and the frantic actions of the motor-man as he sought to wind up his brake betrayed the fact that the car was out of control.

This was a fire-station street, and he should have halted his car at the upper side; but the brake would not work, and the heavily laden car slid down the rails with no decreasing of its speed.

And crossing the tracks was a heavy, two-horse van.

There was no escape for this truck. The driver had evidently taken advantage of his knowledge that the car was supposed, by law, to stop on the near side of the cross-street, and he had driven on.

Billy had a glimpse of a gaudily painted side of the huge van before the crash came. He thought at first glance that it must be a freshly painted moving-van.

The noise of the collision startled the neighborhood, brought heads to the windows, and a crowd of people from the near-by saloons and shops.

The charging car caught the van almost midway of its length, dashed it against the east-side elevated pillars, seemingly with force enough to break the iron support short off, and plowed its way fairly through the rear of the wagon.

Both horses were thrown, and the driver was pitched, like a frog making a dive, to the sidewalk, where he struck on his head and shoulders and lay senseless!

The front of the car was telescoped, and the motorman was buried under the ruins of the hood and dashboard. Shrieks of pain and fear rose from the suddenly darkened interior of the car.

More than one of the passengers were seriously hurt; those who could leaped wildly from the wreck.

The people rushed toward the scene of the collision. Half a thousand anxious folk appeared like magic.

And then suddenly the crowd was stayed, fell back, broke, and fled with shrieks of terror before a mere sound!

From the heart of the fractured and half-overtaken van echoed a ferocious, snarling roar—the warning challenge of some huge member of the feline tribe!

"It's a lion!" one shrieked.

"A tiger! Look out!" yelled another fleeing citizen.

"That's a wild-animal cage!" was the cry taken up by other voices, and the flickering electric on the corner showed Billy and his friends the truth of this statement.

Painted on the forward end of the van was the name of a well-known circus.

"What is it? What is it?" cried Bessie Hardress, clinging tightly to Phil's arm. "Oh, hear it roar!"

Edith clapped both her own hands to her ears to shut out the raucous voice of the angered beast. And then, before Phil or Billy could take steps to remove the girls from danger, a dark, lithe figure burst from the broken van and leaped into the middle of the street!

That first spring of the freed brute was amazing. It was twenty feet from the wreck, and, crouching, lashed its long tail from side to side, while its snarling roar was repeated again and again.

It was neither a lion or a tiger, but a huge black panther—a beast of far greater courage and a more savage temper when in captivity. A lion thus suddenly freed in the streets would have skulked into the first dark hole and cowered there until beaten forth; but the panther leaped into the broad glare of the electric light, and was full of fight on the instant that it realized it was free!

Phil Erwin had to fairly bear up Bessie in his arms. When the panther leaped toward them, the professor's daughter became helpless with fright. Edith was not so bad, but for the moment Billy was stumped! He didn't know which way to turn for escape for the girls.

In that moment of uncertainty the Bowery boy had a view of a couple of cops approaching the scene which, at the corner, was left deserted by the running throng save for himself and friends, and the panther.

One cop came charging down the avenue, saw the huge cat, drew his gun, and tried to fire at it. But for some reason the gun failed to work, and Billy heard six successive snaps as the cop pulled the trigger while the cylinder made a complete circuit.

Then the panther raised its head, glared at the cop, and roared. The man uttered an answering howl, and ran for a place of safety.

From down the avenue came another officer—a big man with a huge mustache, his baton clutched tightly in his right hand.

"Phat is ut? Phat is ut?" this cop was crying to the people who passed him.

Suddenly he caught sight of the panther in the roadway.

"Be th' piper thot played b'fore St. Pathrick!" yelled this big cop. "Wot is ut?"

"Look out, Jake!" shouted Billy, recognizing his old-time friend. "It's a big cat!"

"A cat, is ut?" gasped Jake, advancing cautiously. "Pshaw! if ut's only a cat— Here, pussy, poor pussy!" said Jake coaxingly, holding out his left hand and snapping his fingers encouragingly. "That's a nice——"

He got no farther, for with a snarl the beast leaped straight for him!

"Howly saints!" yelled Jake, and if ever a fat man dodged quick, it was that cop!

He was not quick enough to entirely escape, however. The panther sailed through the air like a flying-squirrel, paws extended and every claw unsheathed.

The right forepaw caught in the shoulder of Jake's coat. R-r-rip! The fabric was rent to the tail—a clean incision, as though cut by a knife, and in places the beast's saberlike claw rent the undergarments, too.

Jake was fat, and his coat fitted him as though he had been boiled down and run into it through a funnel. Where he bulged below what had once been his waist-line, the claw dug through to the flesh and blood flowed!

"Help! help! I'm stabbed!" roared Jake, and he overtook the crowd and distanced it like a steam locomotive going by a parcel of cripples.

The enraged panther landed upon the sidewalk, and it was less than thirty feet from Billy, Phil, and the two girls.

The situation was awful—the more terrifying that the two boys had to devise some means of putting the girls beyond the beast's reach. Only a minute had elapsed since the panther burst into the street—for these things happened much quicker than it takes to relate them—and if the party ran, the boys feared the brute would be tempted into charging them at once.

"Great heavens, Billy! where'll we go?" gasped Phil.

"Wait!" commanded the Bowery boy, holding up the hand which was not engaged in supporting Edith. "Hear dat?"

There was the unearthly "honk! honk!" of an automobile-horn, and around the corner of Second Avenue dashed the machine whose track was cleared by the warning horn. Billy had seen the lamps before the hooting of the horn reached their ears. He jumped to the correct conclusion that it was Mace Soloway's machine, and the next instant he raised his voice in a shrill shout that might have been heard above the noise of a racing locomotive:

"Dis way, fellers! Solly! Here we be!"

Soloway had intended to slow down at the point, half-way along the block, where the alley leading to the lodge-room debouched upon the public thoroughfare. He had shut off the power, so that the drumming of the engine did not interfere with his hearing.

He heard Billy, and he understood—in part, at least. He understood that Billy and the girls had got out quicker than he expected, and he turned on the power again and shot down to the Third Avenue corner. He

was on the scene, with the four endangered young folks and the crouching cat before him ere he realized what all the noise and excitement meant.

"What's that?" yelled Golightly, leaning over the back of the seat and staring at the snarling brute, which was creeping on its belly toward their friends.

"Mercy on us!" gasped Soloway.

Mace wasn't noted for his brilliancy of intellect. He was not quick to grasp an opportunity, although he was not a physical coward. But the appearance of the panther, its glaring eyes, its unsheathed claws—particularly the sound of its snarling challenge—quite flabbergasted him.

He could not grasp the opportunity that Billy had seen the instant he saw the auto coming. The Bowery boy knew that there wasn't time to enter into explanation.

"Look out fer de goils, Philly!" Billy shouted, and, dropping Edith, he made a dash for the auto.

With a snarl, the panther turned to follow, and leaped, striking at the boy in the air!

But the claws missed. Billy reached the front seat beside Mace. He grabbed the controller and steering-wheel as the auto moved slowly past the spot.

The panther had landed in the middle of the side street. Billy shot one glance behind, noted the cat's position, and reversed the mechanism of the auto.

The huge machine darted back as though controlled on the shuttle-system! There was a bump, a terrific shriek from the panther, and they had a view of the black body bounding through the air and landing finally down an area on the other side of the street!

The auto had caught the panther as it leaped a second time, and had flung it forty feet!

"Git erboard, quick!" yelled Billy. "Never mind wait-in' ter have yer tickets punched!"

He reversed the lever again and brought the machine to the curbing. Phil hurried the frightened girls into the car, clambered in himself, and in a moment they shot away from the zone of danger just as the banging of a gong down the avenue gave notice of the approach of the police reserves.

CHAPTER IX.

SINGLE-HANDED.

What happened on that particular Third Avenue corner after Mace Soloway's car left the scene, the friends did not discover until the morning papers came out the

next day. It seemed that the wounded panther was shot to death by the reserves, and its owners threatened to sue the city and the street railway company, and other folks, for the value of the beast.

Meanwhile, the girls were hurried home in a most excited state of mind, Bessie Hardress declaring that she would be afraid to go to sleep for a week, and that she knew she should never want to see a cat again.

Billy withdrew from the party as soon as possible and left the other three boys to take the girls to their residences. He wanted to be by himself and to plan over the work he had mapped out for the next day in connection with the kidnaping of little Tommy Christian.

To save Miss Edie from trouble and the annoyance of a newspaper discussion of the case, the Bowery boy was going ahead without the advice of even his good friend Mr. Myrick; and he likewise wished with all his heart to escape demanding the assistance of the police of the precinct in which Mrs. Manning's flat was located.

Billy believed that Jonas, the Fagin, and Madam Perroza, were in cahoots over this kidnaping. Madam Perroza had told her friend, Mrs. Manning, that she would return to the latter's apartments the next morning.

Why? That Billy could not confidently tell; but as the madam had warned Mrs. Manning to be prepared for a ride the next day, Billy believed the plotters would hold a meeting in Mrs. Manning's flat.

"An' if I don't git ter dat meetin', it's because me valet don't wake me in time," muttered Billy, as he tumbled into bed about midnight. "An' he ain't never failed me yet," and he winked at the alarm-clock in a tin pan on the chair beside the head of his bed.

Like other healthy boys, Billy sometimes slept heavily. He had taken care that the racket of the alarm would be sure to awaken him, no matter how deeply he was sunk in slumber at six o'clock in the morning.

Billy didn't go near his stand, trusting to Smitchy Burke to open up and attend to the customers. As soon as he had his breakfast he hurried to Mrs. Manning's flat, far over in the gas-house district.

Billy started on his mission with some feeling of uncertainty. He had no idea just how many conspirators he might have to face single-handed in this game. Jonas he knew was a cowardly scoundrel, but cunning and unscrupulous; there might be bolder men in the plot than he.

As for Madam Perroza, Billy believed, with all her ladylike airs and graces, that the one time Mame Raddi-

gan could be as vicious and vindictive as her infamous brother.

"And lucky fer me dat Jemmy 'ain't in dis game himself," muttered Billy. "Dat geezer soitenly has kep' er-way from N' Yoik since he give 'em de slip up de river. Yet he'll sure float in here on some tide—I kin be sure of dat. Dese big guns can't keep erway from N' Yoik fer long. Ev'ryt'ing dey love is here.

"Nix! Jemmy may not be in dis kidnapin'-game; but he'll land here sooner or later; an' den it's up ter me ter git him again!" determined Billy.

"It looks now like I'd hafter let de madam go, in any case, or else drag all dis biz t'roo de courts an' make trouble fer Miss Edie wit' old Tom Christian. De madam's er slippery member, an' dat's no dream! It does seem as dough I'd never manage ter git her jest right fer ter start her on a trip up de river.

"But it's comin'. De pitcher is bound ter go ter de well fer de last time. She's de smartest she-crook dat ever I run up ergainst. I t'ought Linda was pretty sharp; an' Dutch Minnie ain't so wuss; but de madam is long-headed—an' she's gittin' bitter. Dat makes her dangerous.

"W'en a woman like her, dat's been straight fer years, an' knows wot good sassiety is, an all dat, gits ter trainin' wit' crooks ergin, she goes de limit!

"I reckon I kin handle her if she comes erlone ter Missus Mannin's house. But supposin' she's got odders wit' her? Chce! Bowery Billy, yer mebbe up erginst de fight of your life."

He patted the bulging revolver in his hip pocket, and made sure of the "black-jack" which he had slipped into a slit in the lining of his coat.

He had to depend upon his own exertions on this occasion—and his exertions alone—to grapple with the enemy. For the sake of keeping the kidnaping a secret, he had not even gone to the precinct captain and asked for help.

He took no chances, therefore. He approached Mrs. Manning's warily, and would not even enter the house until he had searched the neighborhood and made pretty sure that no ill-disposed person was watching the place.

The only slip-up Billy feared in his plans was connected with the fear that Jonas might have some means of communicating with Madam Perroza before the hour which Billy believed the conspirators were to meet at Mrs. Manning's.

Jonas had evidently made himself familiar with the

present associations of his old-time pupil, Sharpie. Possibly little Tommy Christian had opened the Fagin's eyes.

However he learned it, Jonas knew that Sharpie was training with Bowery Billy, and that Bowery Billy would be the one of all other persons to be set on the trail of the kidnaped child.

Of course, Sharpie's escape from the Twenty-fourth Street house would come to the ears of Jonas—probably was known to him before it was made known to Billy by Sharpie himself.

If Jonas could communicate with the other members of the group connected with the kidnaping, he undoubtedly would do so. In this case, if he reached Madam Perroza, the program for this morning might be entirely changed.

One fixed idea in Billy's mind, however, precluded the fact that Jonas could warn Madam Perroza. This was, that he did not believe the madam had made herself wholly known to the Fagin and other people that might be in the plot.

The madam's ability to disguise herself so that her own brother would not know her, and her previous course when Billy had run across her trait, led Billy to believe that she would remain as long as possible unknown to those members of the underworld which she made use of.

Jonas was not the kind of a man whom Madam Perroza would willingly make a familiar associate of. The madam was quite well aware of the Fagin's former connection with little Tommy Christian, and she had undoubtedly looked him up, knowing that he could easily steal the child and keep him quiet through fear. She could not do this herself without being suspected.

But undoubtedly she had planned to dispose of Tommy and conduct the attempt to get ransom for him herself.

This was the way Billy read the cards, and he was prepared to wager all his wealth upon just this turn of the game.

He entered the house finally and made his way to Mrs. Manning's rooms. The old woman was up and expecting him. She was in quite as excited a state as Billy had left her the day before.

"Now, dis ain't goin' ter do, old loidy," declared the boy earnestly. "If youse is dis way, she'll expect' some'ting is wrong de foist t'ing, an' it'll be all off."

"I don't know as I can speak decent to her!" declared Mrs. Manning angrily.

"Well, now, if you don't, mebbe you'll make a lot of

trouble fer me—an', wuss dan dat, she'll mebbe git suspicious, an' 'fore I kin do anyt'ing she'll have flew de coop."

"I don't want to make trouble for you, for I believe you're an honest boy."

"Sure! Me honesty is writ on me face," declared Billy, grinning cheerfully. "I'm so honest dat it hoits me w'en I toins over in bed at night."

"And I like to be straightforward and honest with folks myself," declared Mrs. Manning. "I don't know how to deceive."

"Well, youse needn't deceive none; but, fer pity's sake, old loidy, keep yer mout' shut!" whispered Billy sharply. "Here comes somebody! It's her, by jings!"

He had been peering out of the window. A cab had rattled up from the west and stopped before the tenement-house door. At once a crowd of curious children collected, although they had seen a similar carriage come to this house often.

Billy beheld Madam Perroza—plainly but elegantly dressed—descend from the cab and tell the driver to wait. Then she entered the house.

"Chee! she ain't in such bum luck—I don't t'ink. Dem clo'es cost sumpin'. I reckon, if Raddigan ain't on deck, de madam don't let nottin' git by her."

"Where are you going to hide, boy?" demanded Mrs. Manning, in a hushed voice.

"In yer bedroom."

The next moment there was the sound of a key in the lock, and Madam Perroza opened the door with her private pass-key.

"There you are, Mrs. Manning!" she said cheerfully. "All ready to go out, too? That's nice! I've told the cabby to take you clear up to MacComb's Dam. He's to give you a two hours' drive, at least, and you see that he takes you wherever you want to go."

"I will, ma'am," said Mrs. Manning huskily, and pushed by her visitor into the dark hall without another word.

"Good-by! Have a pleasant drive!" cried Madam Perroza after her.

Mrs. Manning did not trust herself to reply, but went down-stairs at once. The madam went to the window hurriedly and evidently watched her get into the cab and drive off.

She came back into the middle of the sitting-room, shaking her head.

"Strange!" she muttered aloud. "What does she mean? She scarcely spoke to me."

But after a moment she looked at the watch she wore, and the time evidently warned her to brisk movement. She went at once into her own room and closed the door.

Billy had been watching through the crack of the door which opened into Mrs. Manning's bedroom. He had set her closet door ajar, and had found a place behind the old woman's dresses, against the closet wall, that would afford a good hiding-place, if Madam Perroza looked into this apartment.

He had just made up his mind that the woman would take it for granted that she was alone, when suddenly her door opened again. The madam had removed her coat and hat and likewise the basque she wore. Her arms and neck were bare, and she pulled a tiny shawl about her shoulders as she came out.

"I don't suppose there can be anybody here," she muttered. "But the old woman acted so strangely——"

Billy heard no more. He darted into the closet and burrowed behind the dresses. Madam Perroza came into the room, even poked her head into the closet. But she was merely satisfying what she herself considered to be a foolish nervous dread, and did not poke about very much.

Billy heard her go all over the flat and then return to her own room.

Having already bared her arms and neck, the madam proceeded to sit down before her bureau, and, opening a small make-up box, she put all of twenty years into her rather comely countenance, with great despatch and a deal of ingenuity. She darkened her face, throat, hands, and wrists, too, painted shadows on the throat and backs of the hands which really looked like wrinkles, and then drew on half-mittens over her hands, which helped in the disguise.

She brought forth the gray wig copied on the style of Mrs. Manning's hair and best "false front," put it on, adjusted the old-fashioned cap, the spectacles, and the stuff-dress over her own skirt. A little shawl completed the disguise.

Madam Perroza presumed to meet the other members of the kidnaping gang in the disguise of Mrs. Manning; evidently Jonas knew her in no other character.

Madam Perroza put all straight in her own room and locked up her usual clothing and the paint-box. Then

she came out into the sitting-room with some knitting in her hands, arranged a rocking-chair with its back to the light so that her face would be in the shadow, and sat down.

Her attitude proved to Billy that she expected somebody to come—and, of course, before Mrs. Manning returned. It was up to the Bowery boy to make the first move, however!

CHAPTER X.

BILLY TURNS A SHREWD TRICK.

Although Bowery Billy had been partially prepared for this conduct on Madam Perroza's part, the fact that she was intending to fool her expected visitor, or visitors, into believing that she was Mrs. Manning had only been a wee supposition in the Bowery boy's mind.

"Green bananers! she's bound ter make a hit, an' dat's no dream. If Madam Perroza don't git a stretch dat'll keep her locked up fer a long term, she's li'ble to turn some great tricks in crookdom.

"Dis plant is easy ter guess now. She's only knowed ter dem wot's woikin' wit' her as dis old skoit, Missus Mannin'. She sees 'em here in de old woman's flat.

"If de cops is onter her visitors, or any inquiries is made, everyt'ing p'int's ter de old woman as de one wot was mixed up in de biz. Chee! but it's a dirty trick! Usin' dis innocent old party in such a game!"

This discovery hardened Billy's heart against Madam Perroza—if such hardening was needed. He might have hesitated to use means with her that he would with a man, had he not realized how desperately mean the woman was acting.

However, the Bowery boy seized a towel, stole across the carpeted floor behind the woman, and before she had the first suspicion of the presence of another soul but herself in the apartments, he flung the towel over her face and tied it tight, muffling her cries and throwing her and the rocker backward to the floor!

Madam Perroza was a well-built woman, and she fought desperately; Billy, however, was taking no chances, and if she were armed he gave her no opportunity of getting hold of a weapon.

He seized her wrists, flung her over on her face, pressed his knee into the small of her back, and so held her powerless while he lashed her wrists behind her with his handkerchief.

"Dere, ma'am! youse is triced up nice an' neat," he said grimly, lifting her into another chair, and arranging the folds of the towel so that her nostrils were uncovered and she could breathe more easily.

"Yer knows me, I see! Yes, Bowery Billy, at your service! Youse an' me is bound ter meet as long as you don't cut out dis graftin' biz an' take a toin at bein' honest.

"But I ain't got time ter tell yer all de news, an' read yer a moral lecture, not now, I ain't! Got yer breat'? Feel better, don't yer?"

"Den, come on inter yer bedroom. I'll take dat false hair, ma'am. Green bananers! an' de spectacles—an' dere's anodder pair of mitts. Chee! I sees me way clear now, I sure do!"

He hustled the woman into the bedroom, sat her in another chair, and tied her ankles tightly together, and to the bedpost. He had to hurry, for he believed that whoever Madam Perroza had expected might arrive now at any moment.

He had the duplicate key to the woman's bureau, and he took out the make-up box and did some valuable work on his own face and hands, for Billy was an adept at that business.

All the time Madam Perroza was glaring at him much as the black panther had glared the night before.

"Green bananers!" thought the Bowery boy, "dis skoit an' dat cat remin's me er good bit of each odder, at dat! She'd claw me ter fiddle-strings jest as quick as dat panther would. I soitenly hopes dat dis will be me last pussonal meetin' wit' Madam Perroza."

Billy adjusted the wig, cap, and spectacles, drew on the mitts, and then rummaged in Mrs. Manning's closet for an old dress. This, put on over his own clothes and added to by a shawl pulled over his shoulders, made his figure bulky enough, and, as he sat in the big chair in the main room of the flat, with the shades half-drawn, he looked not unlike the owner and proprietor of the place.

Billy's pistol was in his lap under an apron, and his hand clutched the butt of the gun firmly as he heard somebody stumbling along the hall. He had taken the precaution to snap back the latch of the spring-lock, and when the "somebody" outside rapped hesitatingly, he cried, in as shrill a voice as he could assume:

"Come in!"

The door opened slowly—hesitatingly.

"Come in! come in!" repeated Billy.

Suddenly there was a chuckle in the darkness of the hall, and the next moment a well-known voice whispered:

"Aw, cheese it, Billy! is dat youse? I wouldn't ha' knowed yer! As er skoit, youse is soitenly a peach!"

"Green bananers!" murmured Billy, as Sharpie dodged into the room and closed the door softly behind him.

"Cheese it!" whispered the younger boy. "I soitenly t'ought I'd broke inter de wrong flat. Wot's doin'?"

"Wot's doin' wit' youse?" demanded Billy sternly. "Is dis wot I told youse ter do?"

"Yep."

"How d'youse make dat out?"

"Dey're comin'!" whispered Sharpie.

"Who's comin'?"

"Jonas an' Tommy—yep! I seen 'em git off de car at de corner. Dey didn't see me. Cheese it! if it hadn't been fer wot youse told me, I'd ha' called a cop an' had de dirty loafer pinched right den an' dere!"

"Ho, ho!" grunted Billy. "Youse ain't as tender of Jonas as youse useter be, Sharpie."

"Well," grumbled the younger lad, "he hadn't tried ter kidnap Tommy den!"

"Aw right. Anybody else wit' de skunk?"

"Naw. He's doin' all dis by his lonesome. It's only him an' de woman—w'ere is she?"

Billy jerked his thumb toward the closed door of the madam's bedroom.

"She's fixed," he said.

"Where'll I hide—in dere, too?" asked Sharpie.

"Naw. Go in dat odder-room," said Billy, making one mistake that he afterward seriously regretted. If only Sharpie had entered the room where Billy had left Madam Perroza prisoner, at just that minute!

There was time for no more words. Already there were footsteps outside and the muffled sobbing of a child.

"Git!" breathed Billy, and settled himself into his chair again.

Rap! rap!

"Come in! come in!" shrilled the supposed old lady, beginning to rock creakingly in the big chair.

The door opened instantly and the hatchet-faced and greasy locks of Jonas, the Fagin, appeared. Instantly seeing the occupant of the room he whispered:

"All right?"

Billy nodded vigorously and beckoned with his knitting-needles—but carefully keeping his right hand under his apron. Jonas entered, dragging the frightened Tommy Christian with him into the room.

"Quick! I don't like this," muttered Jonas. "This is too public. Here! stop your bawling!" to Tommy. "Here's the nice old lady I told you of. She'll look out for you! Come and see her!"

Evidently Tommy was not enamored of the "nice old lady." One look he gave and then raised his voice in a tremulous howl.

"Shut up!" hissed Jonas, and raised his hand to strike the child.

Billy had no time to interfere; but there was another pair of eyes watching the scene.

With a shout of anger Sharpie darted from the bedroom and flung himself on Jonas, the Fagin, and bore him backward to the floor. At the same moment Bowery Billy whipped off his disguise.

"I got him, Billy!" yelled Sharpie. "Got de darbies? Lemme put 'em on de scoundrel's hands!"

Billy would have laughed at another time, Sharpie was so vicious. But he saw that the handcuffs were adjusted properly and then turned to comfort Tommy.

But it was Sharpie who seemed to encourage the small boy with the most success. Tommy ran and put his hand in Sharpie's.

"Oh, Sharpie!" he cried. "You won't let Jonas have me any more, will you?"

"Naw—not fer a farm! Not fer a dollar bill!" declared the street waif.

"And you'll take me home to Edie and my uncle?"

"Sure, kid!" declared Sharpie. "We'll make a home run. D'youse want us any more, Billy?"

"Well, of all de gall!" grumbled Billy, getting slowly out of his disguise. "After me doin' all de woik, yer hands me de lemon an' no mistake! Green bananers, kid! but youse is soitenly a nifty one. G'wan—wot's dat?"

A door banged somewhere at the other end of the flat—the kitchen end. Billy bounded out of the skirt, tripped over it, and fell. Sharpie sprang completely over the body of his prostrate friend and dashed down the passage to the kitchen.

"Cheese it, Billy! dere ain't nobody here!" he bawled.

But that fall seemed to have shaken some ideas into Billy's head. Instead of following the younger boy he flung open the door of Madam Perroza's room. It was

empty! The madam had jerked her hands free, had unfastened her ankles, removed the towel, and seizing her cloak and bonnet, had escaped while the boys were capturing her companion in crime, Jonas, the Fagin!

Billy dashed down-stairs after her. He made inquiries of the other tenants, and on the street. But nobody had chanced to see the woman.

Later the young detective made up his mind that Madam Perroza had escaped in some manner by the rear. It was likely that she had not planned her coup in this house without having made some provision for a slip-up.

"I gotter make up me mind," declared Billy, "dat bot Raddigan an' his sister is us'ally one too many fer me!"

"Dey're two too many for youse," grinned Sharpie.

"Dat's so. Lemme tell yer sumpin', kid. De nex' time Bowery Billy runs up erginst eider of dem—Raddigan or de madam—he ain't goin' ter fall down."

"Yer ain't fell down dis time," said Sharpie. "We got de kid—an' we got Jonas."

"Sure! But we ain't got de madam. Jonas we'll send over de road on anudder count—sure! But de madam's made a good get-away. An' cripes! if she hadn't, I dunno wot we'd ha' done wit' her. She'd ha' been a white elephant on our han's, as long as we didn't wanten open up dis kidnapin' biz.

"Aw, well! our chance't is sure ter come some day. 'Once er crook, alwus er crqok,' mebbe ain't true; but it's so true dat it makes er feller pessermistic ter t'ink how few exceptions dere is ter de rule!"

Jonas was landed in jail, and Detective Eddie Reardon, the "gang breaker," found a good case against the Fagin which had been held in the district attorney's office for some months. Jonas was "put away" for five years.

Tommy was delivered to Edith that afternoon as Billy had promised, and all hands promised to say nothing about the kidnaping to the boy's uncle when he came back.

"For I should have been more careful," declared Edith. "He's only a little boy and doesn't know; I'll not let him out of my sight again until Mr. Christian comes home."

Mrs. Manning has been taken under the especial care of Edith Smalls now, and finds in that young girl a much more trustworthy and kindly patron than ever was Madam Perroza.

THE END.

Next week's issue, No. 84, is entitled "Bowery Billy's Decoration; or, A Mystery of the French Quarter."

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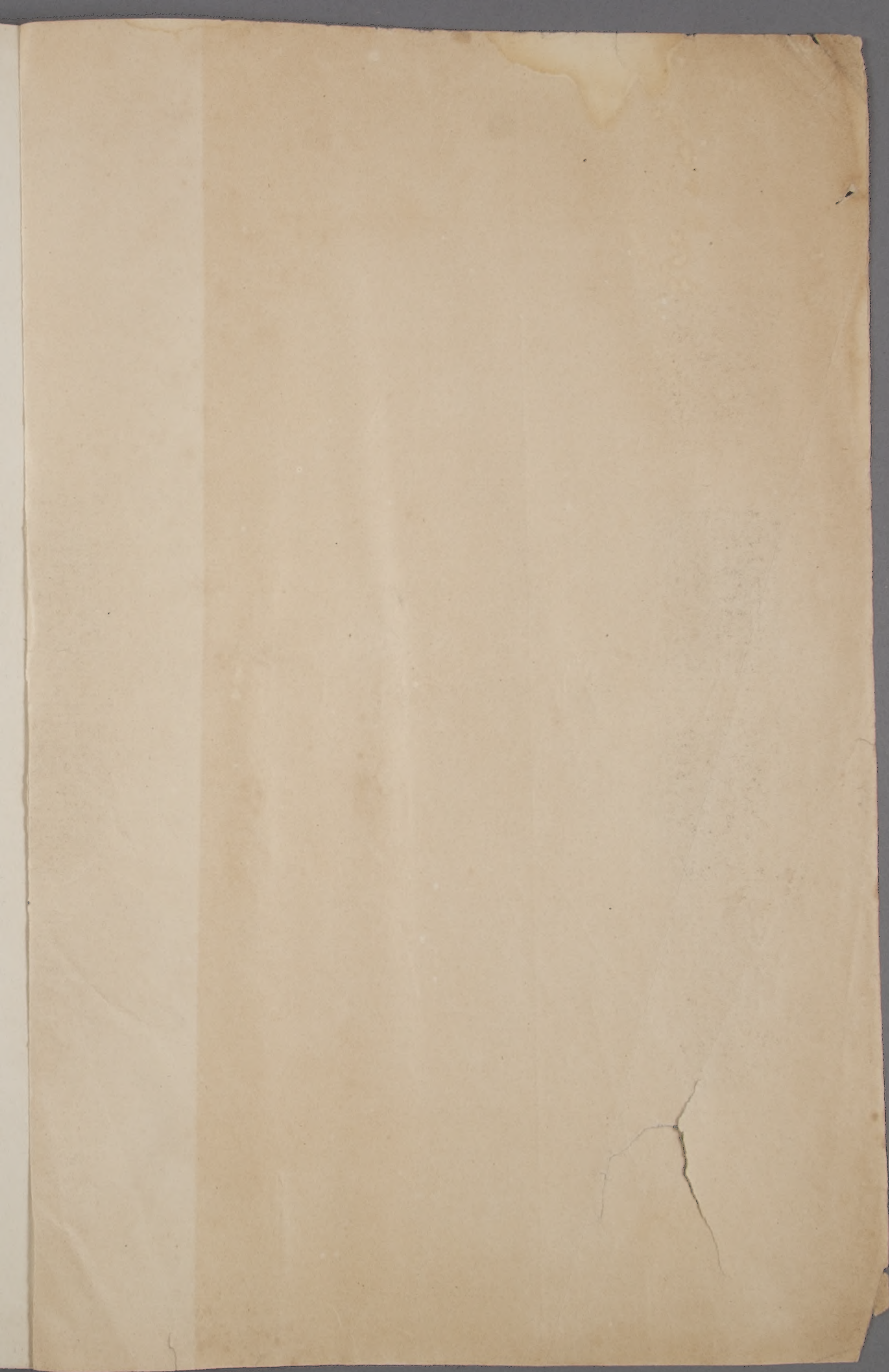
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